

Helping Our Children Develop Testimonies that Will Withstand Opposition

It seemed to me that about half the talks during general conference last week (April 2015) were either about hanging on to your own testimony, or helping other people hang on to theirs. Several also talked about the responsibilities that parents have to their families. I am going to follow up on those two themes today by sharing some ideas about how we can help our children to not only develop testimonies, but to develop testimonies that will withstand opposition.

The impression I got while preparing these comments is that my job is simply to share a bunch of thoughts and then let people pick out the parts are meaningful to them in light of their own circumstances.

1. Know Why You Believe What You Believe, and Get Used to Standing Up for It

First idea. At our house when our kids were younger, if somebody said something and somebody else disagreed, I would often interrupt and announce to the entire family how we could tell who was right. “I bet the person who is right is the one who can yell longer and louder and scream their head off until the other person cries. Or we could just look it up, but yelling and screaming is much more educational.” From a very young age this routine hardly got started before our kids would interrupt with “No, Daddy, you look it up. Silly Daddy.”

This routine sounds trivial, but it taught our children two important lessons that I believe have significant spiritual consequences.

First, it taught our children to stand up for what they know is right. In this case standing up for the idea that screaming your head off is not a logically compelling argument. But more broadly, our children have grown up with a lifetime of experience that every time they told an authority figure they were spouting nonsense, our kids got positive reinforcement. Now if your number one goal is to raise well behaved children who always mind, this may not be for you. But if your goal is to help your kids get used to standing up for what they know is right, then let me suggest this general strategy of – all that stuff you want to beat into your kids’ heads – coopt them into beating it into yours. So the first lesson is “No, silly Daddy,”

The other lesson that our kids learned from this routine is “... you go look it up.” Or you verify your sources. Or you check your data. Call it what you want, but the idea is for our kids to get used to having a good reason for believing what they believe, and to insist on having an even better reason before changing that belief. So when two people in our house disagree about something, we look it up. And it is never about *who* is right, but about *what* is right. If you are the first one to find the correct answer proving that you were ... wrong, well at our house that is just as praiseworthy as having been right in the first place. If two people disagree, someone is about to get smarter, and no one is going to get emotionally beat up in this team effort to acquire more truth.

I once worked with a quality control engineer who had a sign on her desk that said “Without data, it’s just an opinion.” A while ago my wife and I were talking about something and I said “Oh yeah, the Joseph Smith Translation says something interesting about that.” So I went and pulled it off the shelf and showed her what it says. Not because I was afraid she wouldn’t believe me. But because if I tell her, then all she knows is that *I* know. But if she sees the underlying data for herself, now *she* owns that understanding just as much as I do. That is the difference between opinions that we own for ourselves and opinions that we merely borrow from others. There is a strength that comes from not only knowing the answer, but knowing why you know the answer.

So the first idea is to teach our kids to know why they know something, to know it for themselves, and then to stand up for it. “No, Daddy,” and “you look it up.”

2. Recognizing Revelation

The second idea is to teach our children to recognize revelation. In Moroni chapter 10 it says that if we read the Book of Mormon and sincerely pray for a testimony, then the Lord will reveal the truth of it to us by the power of the Holy Ghost. And if the Book of Mormon is true, then Joseph Smith was a prophet and this is God’s church.

I think we generally understand how important it is for our children have this experience and learn for themselves that the gospel is true. But if that process depends on being able to recognize a witness of the Holy Ghost, then we need to prepare our children for that experience by ... teaching them to recognize the Holy Ghost. And the best way I know to do that is to make a habit of

specifically pointing it out to them when it is present. So the second idea is that when the Holy Ghost is present, point it out to your kids.

And this means having a home where the Holy Ghost is present often enough to be pointed out. What do we have on the radio and on TV? How much unkindness do we tolerate? You know how to evaluate your home and identify whether anything needs to change.

3. A Basic Testimony Is of Official Doctrine Only

The third idea is to teach our children what is, and is not, included in a standard testimony. Once our children read the Book of Mormon, pray, and receive a testimony, the next question is: What does this give us a testimony of? It gives us a testimony of the Lord's restored gospel. Or since this is the Lord's church, it gives us a testimony of official Church doctrine. Specifically, it gives us a testimony of the scriptures, and a few official statements by the First Presidency, ... and that's all. A witness that the Book of Mormon is true does not also mean that everything else we hear within the LDS community is 100% accurate. If something I say up here today turns out to be wrong, that does not call into question the truth of the entire Restoration, and our kids need to understand that difference.

One useful way to think about religion is not as a *body* of knowledge that has already been accumulated, but as a *way* to acquire new knowledge. Not as *what* do we know, but as *how* do we know it. From this perspective, religious knowledge is God telling us things through divine revelation.

Revelation is a powerful way of knowing. It can tell us things that we did not know and could never figure out. But religion, science, and every other way of knowing – all have blind spots or limitations. The limitation of revelation is that we can only learn through revelation what God chooses to reveal. When God has spoken, he has spoken. And when he has not spoken through revelation, ... he has not spoken. Once we start asking questions that go beyond what has been settled by officially sanctioned revelation, once we go beyond the scriptures and a handful of official statements by the First Presidency, once we go beyond official Church doctrine, there is room for people to think for themselves, seek personal revelation, try to figure out the answer, sometimes

reach different conclusions, ... and still be good members of the Church. About a dozen years ago during a council meeting there was a friendly disagreement during which “Elder Haight, [age] 96, turned to President Hinckley, [age] 93, and remarked: ‘That’s okay, Gordon. I used to think like that when I was your age.’” [1](#)

So the third idea here is that when our children hear something at Church, or about the Church, and they want to know if it is true, their first question should always be: Is this official Church doctrine? Because if it is not official doctrine, then we have permission to think and pray for ourselves, to reach a different conclusion, and to not let what we have heard bother us.

3a. Received Wisdom Is Not Official Doctrine

Let me talk about two situations where we often end up thinking that something is official Church doctrine even though it really is not. The first is where we just assume something is true because we have grown up hearing it all our lives. Robert Millett, a BYU religion professor, tells a story that illustrates this situation and the problems it can cause. He spoke to a large audience of both members and non-members, talking about what we believe. After the meeting, a lady who is a member of the Church came up to him and said, “

“You didn’t tell the truth about what we believe!” Startled, I asked “What do you mean?” She responded, “You said we believe [X], and you know very well that we don’t believe that.” “Yes, we do,” I retorted. She then said, with a great deal of emotion, “I want to believe you, but people have told me for years that we believe [something else].” I looked her in the eyes and said, “I am aware of that teaching, but that is not the doctrine of the Church; that is not what we teach in the Church today. Have you ever heard the Brethren teach it in conference? Is it in the standard works, the curricular materials, or the handbooks of the Church? Is it a part of an official declaration or proclamation?” I watched as a five hundred pound weight seemed to come off her shoulders, as tears came into her eyes, and she simply said, “Thank you, Brother Millett.” [2](#)

This lady was deeply bothered by a doctrine that, once she stopped to think about why she believed it, realized that it was not in fact a doctrine of the Church, just the shared opinion of a whole lot of people. So I again think it is worth asking ourselves why we believe what we believe. Is it an official doctrine, or is it just culture? Is it even Mormon culture, or have we borrowed something simply because religious conservatives who are not Mormon believe it, and we are religious conservatives too, so I guess maybe we believe it too.

At our house we often answer our kids' questions something like this: "Many active Mormons who have thought about this issue believe X, including us, and this is why it makes sense to us. But it is not official doctrine, and it may turn out to be wrong. Since we are not aware of any revelation to settle the matter, this is simply the best that we can figure out so far." Our children may not remember the specific doctrines involved each and every time we say this, but they do remember that this concept seems to apply an awful lot of the time.

Let me also mention that it is really nice now that our kids are old enough, and have a good enough grasp of the official doctrines, that we can now afford to share this kind of food for thought. But younger children are not very good at the difference between certain knowledge and a tentative hypothesis. So when our kids were younger, hard as it was, we did not go beyond the basic official doctrines.

3b. Statements by Individual Church Leaders Are Not Official Doctrine

The other situation where we often think that something is official Church doctrine, when it really is not, is when we *can* track an idea back to its source, and that source is a Church leader.

More than once I have gone online to look for some uplifting quote that I think I remember apostle so-and-so saying, and on my first page of search results, half the links are to antagonistic websites that make two claims: (1) this apostle said something that turned out not to be true; and (2) the existence of a wrong statement by a Church leader proves that the entire Church is not true. Since this has happened to me more than once, I have to assume that it will someday happen to my children.

And the fact is that the *first* of these two claims is sometimes true. There are some wrong statements by past Church leaders. As President Uchtdorf said in the October 2013 General Conference ([Come Join With Us](#)):

We openly acknowledge that in nearly 200 years of Church history, along with an uninterrupted line of inspired, honorable, and divine events, there have been some things said and done that could cause people to question. ... to be perfectly frank, there have been times when members or leaders in the Church have simply made mistakes. There may have been things said or done that were not in harmony with our values, principles, or doctrine.

So how do we teach our children ahead of time to deal with that experience when they are off at college and we are not around? Or in other words, how do we inoculate our children so that, when they run across those pages on the internet, they do not get disillusioned, and it does not affect their testimony? The answer is to teach our children ahead of time that the *second* claim is false. That the truth of the Church does not depend on the accuracy of every statement ever made by a Church leader. And we do this by teaching our children about the Order of Revelation. Or as I call it, the doctrine of doctrine. Which sounds like using a word in its own definition. But the concept is this: What is the Church's official position about when the Church has an official position.

In September 1830, just a few months after the Church was organized, a member named Hiram Page started claiming to receive revelations for the Church. The Lord shut this down, not by disavowing Hiram Page's specific statements, but by disavowing the whole idea that anyone other than the prophet will ever be given revelation to guide the entire Church. In the revelation we know as [Section 28 \[1-7\]](#), the Lord said to Oliver Cowdery:

[B]ehold, verily ... I say unto thee, no one shall be appointed to *receive* commandments and revelations in this church excepting my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., for he receiveth them even as Moses. ... And if thou [Oliver] art led at any time by the Comforter to *speak* or *teach* ... by the way of commandment ... thou mayest do it. But thou shalt not *write* by way of *commandment*, but by [way of] *wisdom*; ...

What does this mean? The Order of Revelation is that only the prophet receives revelation that is preserved and considered to be binding upon the entire Church. Or in other words only the prophet gets to *write* by way of commandment. Other people, while they can *teach* or *speak* by way of commandment, only get to *write* by way of wisdom, or by way of helpful personal opinion. Consistent with this Order of Revelation, a year and a half later in [Section 68 \[:1-5\]](#) the Lord also said this about missionaries:

[W]hatsoever they shall *speak* [not *write*, but whatever they *speak*] when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will of the Lord, shall be the mind of the Lord, shall be the word of the Lord, shall be the voice of the Lord, and the power of God unto salvation.³

So, a visiting general authority, and the stake president, and the bishop, all have the authority to stand up and tell this congregation that we need to do X, and this can be the mind and will of the Lord and the power of God unto salvation for us. But it will not be recorded for permanent and widespread distribution, and will instead be limited in its application to a particular time, place, group, and circumstance. What the bishop cannot do, and the stake president cannot do, and even apostles cannot do, is announce revelation or doctrine of general application that is to be received as official and true for all people in all times in all places. In this connection I often find it helpful to distinguish between *what* to do and *why*, or between the widely dispersed authority to exhort people about what to do now, and the authority that is limited to the prophet to provide official doctrinal explanations of how things work in general.

Now that we understand the Order of Revelation, Elder Christofferson's statement in the April 2012 Conference ([The Doctrine of Christ](#))⁴ makes perfect sense. "It is commonly understood in the Church that a statement made by one leader on a single occasion often represents a personal ... opinion, not meant to be official or binding for the whole Church."

I thought Elder Holland in his conference talk last week (April 2015, [Where Justice, Love and Mercy Meet](#)) did an excellent job of reminding us that there are some questions where the Church does have an official position, and of then declining to stake out a position on anything beyond that. Unfortunately, the personality of some past Church leaders was to be less careful in

their statements, our children are going to be confronted with that fact, and when this happens they need to already be inoculated and know how to deal with it ... by understanding the Order of Revelation, or the doctrine of official doctrine.

4. It Is Okay to Ask Questions

The fourth idea is to teach our children that it is okay to ask questions. Now sometimes somebody doesn't get the memo. About 80 years ago a Church magazine once said that "When our leaders speak, the thinking has been done." But the prophet, George Albert Smith, promptly disagreed and said that "*Even to imply* that members of the Church are not to do their own thinking is [to] *grossly* misrepresent the true ideal of the Church."⁵ More recently in the October 2013 General Conference ([Come Join With Us](#)), President Uchtdorf said "In this Church ... that was restored by a young man who asked questions and sought answers, we respect those who honestly search for truth." I would add that, in a Church that has turned Joseph's question about what Church is true into *scripture*, do you really need to feel out of place just because you have some questions too?

And don't think that you are the only person who has ever had questions they couldn't make sense of. At the beginning of my mission I had four big doctrinal questions that really bugged me. I still remember very clearly when I got the answer to the last of those four questions. Two months before I came home my companion handed me something to read, and it only took a couple minutes to realize that the last of my questions was being answered right then at the conclusion of my service. But it took almost the entire two years, which at age 20 is a long time. Later on I had another set of questions, and it took about ten years to get all of those resolved. When this ward was formed a year ago I had another pair of questions that had been bothering me, and those only got resolved about three or four months ago. Do you *have* to ask questions? No. But the fourth idea is that it is certainly okay to ask questions.

But in order for our kids to believe us when we say that it is okay to ask questions, we have to have an environment that never threatens their emotional security. Where questions are treated seriously and fairly. Where we act as a sounding board to help them refine their own thinking, but we remember that in the end it is their own thinking. Where we allow time for them to digest food for thought. And where we remember the Lord's clear instruction in [Section 50 \[:13-23\]](#) that

conversion is to ultimately come through the witness of the Holy Ghost, “and if it be by some other way, it is not of God.”

5. You Know Enough

The fifth and final idea is to teach our children to recognize when they know *enough*. Just because unanswered questions are frustrating does not mean they should start making us doubt the things that we do know. Our kids need to understand the idea that even if they have unanswered questions, they at least know enough to be certain about the basics. Of all that was said last week in conference about testimonies, I think the single best statement came from Sister Wixom (April 2015, [Returning to Faith](#)) when she said “Focus on what you know.”

For example, how many people really understand how cell phones work? But has that lack of understanding ever stopped any of us from using our cell phones? They do work, we can tell that they work, and that means we know enough to use them. Even if we don’t understand as much as we want about why they work

My wife’s uncle is the head of a university physics department. I recently asked him a physics question, and in a second here I will read part of his response. You may not be familiar with the concepts that he mentions, but you *can* tell that scientists are struggling with some unanswered questions. “There are [] a zillion unanswered holes in our understanding [of physics]. ... There is no sign, for instance, of predicted super symmetry, and [scientists] are still reeling over the discovery of dark energy.” So like I said, scientists don’t yet understand everything as well as they would like. Fortunately, they do at least understand enough to figure out how to make cell phones. And use those cell phones to talk to each other while they work on the parts that do not yet make any sense. What scientists do *not* do is decide that, just because they have some unanswered questions, they should reject science altogether and quit using their cell phones. That would be downright silly.

It is just the same with the gospel. When I read the scriptures, pray, and go to church, I feel the Holy Ghost. When I obey the promptings of the Holy Ghost, I am happier and things turn out better. When I pray, I get answers often enough. And when I put my hands on people’s heads and give them blessings, genuine miracles happen. I am not sure how much more than that I really have

to understand in order to be able to use the gospel in exactly the same way that I use my cell phone. No matter how much more I either learn, or don't learn, two facts will always remain. I will never understand everything, And I have long ago understood enough. Miracles that I have personally participated in don't stop being true just because I don't understand a verse in the Bible, or because I don't understand the Church's position on a particular social issue. So the fifth idea is that when our children face difficult questions that they can't make sense of, they also need to know that they know enough. And we need to teach them what enough is.

6. Testimony

How this talk happened by following a couple points of inspiration.

How I came to recognize and learn to trust the Holy Ghost.

ENDNOTES

1. Flake, Lawrence. As reported in Tad Walch, "[Tales of LDS Leaders' Wit a Big Draw at Ed Week](#)," Deseret Morning News, 21 August 2003. Found in Boyce, Duane, "[Sustaining the Brethren](#)," n. 31. In *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015), p. vii-xxii.

2. Millet, Robert. "[What Is Our Doctrine?](#)" p. 24. In *The Religious Educator*, Vol 4, No. 3, p. 14-33 (2003).

3. For a further discussion of the Order of Revelation as explained in Doctrine & Covenants sections 28, 43, 1, 67, 68, see Kurt Elieson, [Historical Context of the Doctrine & Covenants, Vol. 1](#) and its discussion of those five sections.

4. For a further discussion of official Church doctrine, see Elder Christofferson's talk in the April 2012 General Conference ([The Doctrine of Christ](#)) and his discussion of the classic article written by J. Reuben Clark, Jr. in 1954.

5. Givens, Terryl. [People of Paradox](#), p. 18 (Oxford 2007). Citing, "A 1945 Perspective," *Dialogue* 19.1 (Spring 1986): 38. Quoting, Letter of President George Albert Smith to Dr. J. Raymond Cope 7 Dec 1945.

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