

Introduction

The audience for this document are the LDS members who are struggling with faith related to historical issues, and the bishops, stake presidents, and other loved ones that are supporting them through this process.

The goal of this document is to share information that will help the struggling member retain faith in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Additionally, this information can help bishops, stake presidents, and parents help those in their stewardship to develop a robust kind of faith that can better process these issues.

The Premise

In a talk to CES instructors in Feb 2016, M. Russell Ballard spoke about the faith crisis many in the church are having, going online and discovering difficult information about the church's past. He asked CES teachers to rely on faithful, LDS scholars to obtain current, accurate information to address these concerns.

Gone are the days when a student asked an honest question and a teacher responded, "Don't worry about it!" Gone are the days when a student raised a sincere concern and a teacher bore his or her testimony as a response intended to avoid the issue. Gone are the days when students were protected from people who attacked the Church. Fortunately, the Lord provided this timely and timeless counsel to you teachers: "And as all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith."

In this document, Elder Ballard's counsel of seeking out current information from the church's best, faithful scholars is taken to heart. The criteria for these quotes: only top scholars recognized both within the church and outside the church are included. Only faithful scholars who are accepted in mainstream LDS circles and appear to be supported by the brethren are included. Only recent publications, presentations, and interviews are used.

The scholars included:

Richard Bushman: PhD in history from Harvard University. Former stake president. Retired professor from Columbia University. Former Howard W. Hunter Chair of Mormon Studies at Claremont University. Author of many books including *Rough Stone Rolling*.

Terryl Givens: Professor at University of Richmond. Former bishop. Author of *The God Who Weeps*, *Crucible of Doubt*, and other popular LDS books. With his wife, Fiona Givens, chosen by the church to do a "faith crisis" fireside tour in Europe and North America. Richard Bushman was also involved with some of those.

Spencer Fluhman: PhD in history from Wisconsin. Current head of the Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at BYU. LDS bishop in Cedar Hills, Utah.

Patrick Mason: PhD in history from Notre Dame. Current Howard W. Hunter Chair of Mormon Studies at Claremont University. Author of *Deseret Book* popular selling book: *Planted*. Author of article at www.ldsiving.com "Surviving a Faith Crisis (and How Church Members Can Help)"

Adam Miller, PhD in Philosophy from Villanova. Professor at Collin College in Texas. Director of the Mormon Theology Seminar.

Grant Hardy: PhD from Yale. Professor of Religious Studies and History at UNC Asheville. Currently serving LDS stake presidency. Speaker at FairMormon conference. Author of book "Understanding the Book of Mormon" used in BYU Book of Mormon religion classes.

Summary

To the LDS member struggling with historical or political issues:

- LDS church history (all history for that matter) is messy. The nice, clean version many were taught growing up has inaccuracies.
- Prophets are not perfect nor should we expect them to be. They make mistakes and have in the past, even major mistakes. But God works through imperfect human beings.
- Scripture is not meant to be understood as “God-breathed” to man, including the Book of Mormon. We should expect to find error in scripture: racism, inaccurate history, attributing to God things that likely shouldn’t be, cultural misunderstandings, etc.
- Translation, when referring to Joseph Smith’s translations such as the Book of Mormon or Book of Abraham, likely meant something different to Joseph Smith than it means to us today. It shouldn’t be surprising to find modern content, ie vocabulary, phraseology, and even ideas, which are viewed as expansions that come through the mind of Joseph built on top of an ancient historical record.
- Scientific understanding of how the world was created, how man evolved, the absence of a worldwide flood, how human civilizations started and spread throughout the world generally should be trusted. LDS theology works just fine within this structure.
- LDS critics sometimes overstate or manipulate facts that make the church look bad. But sometimes their facts are accurate. Frequently, the best strategy is not to defend a prophet or scripture or the church against “anti-Mormon” facts but to shift a paradigm to accept the difficult fact while still maintaining faith in God and the church.
- Be patient. These are difficult issues that can take months or years of study, thought, and prayer before peace and resolution is found. But the journey is rewarding, and it will lead to a deeper relationship with God.
- The church is true. God is in this church and in this work. The church is needed in this world, and we have a purpose.
- LDS scripture and theology is deep and robust and rewarding

To LDS bishops and stake presidents or those with loved ones that struggle:

- We have overstated the strength of our case of exclusivity. It would be helpful to back off that little.
- We need to get more comfortable with uncertainty and allow for faith and hope to become a more important aspect of our religion
- We shouldn’t judge those who doubt or assume if they struggle with the church or even leave, that it is due to sin or some defect
- When discussing our unity as a Body of Christ, a shift in emphasis from orthodoxy (right belief) to orthopraxy (right action) would be helpful.
- When we defend the church or testify, it’s more helpful to focus on the fruits of living a Christ centered LDS life than to focus on the absolute truth of our foundational events and scripture.
- It is helpful to allow for nuanced views of issues like scripture historicity, prophet fallibility, literalism, exclusivity, authority, etc.
- We easily recognize the problem of fundamentalism within Evangelical Christianity, ie when the Bible is claimed to be literal and inerrant. We should get more comfortable applying that perspective to LDS specific revelations, such as the Book of Mormon or restoration events.

Quotes from the Scholars

Patrick Mason

From book “Planted” and FairMormon conference talk <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2016-fairmormon-conference/courage-convictions>

Many of our problems stem from the fact that in the church we have developed an erroneous cultural notion of prophetic infallibility that has its foundation neither in scripture nor in the teachings of the modern prophets themselves.

One of the key tasks before us is developing a better, more sophisticated, and frankly more Christian theology of prophets and prophethood. We have treated our prophets too often as demigods. We do not believe in prophetic infallibility. This cannot be said enough, and it cannot be taken seriously enough. We give it lip service but too often do not believe it, nor consider its implications, other than the intellectually lazy conclusion that the whole thing must either be all true or a complete fraud.

Can we believe that fallible human beings can also be conduits for the Lord's will? Can a prophet be inspired and in error, even on the same day or in the same sermon? Do we believe our bishops and stake presidents can be trusted to carry out the Lord's will in their jurisdictions, which our theology states is just as significant and sacred as the prophet's stewardship over the entire church? Can we ourselves, with all our flaws, filters, and prejudices, nonetheless be genuinely inspired of the Lord? Do we really believe that the "weak things of the world" can be agents of God (1 Corinthians 1:27; D&C 1:19; 35:13)? It is a daring assertion, but it is a crucial element of our religion. Part of the essence of Mormonism is trusting the revelation of other fallible human beings.

One of the problems we have in Mormonism is that we have loaded too much into the Truth Cart. And then when anything in the cart starts to rot a bit, or look unseemly upon further inspection, some have a tendency to overturn the entire cart or seek a refund for the whole lot. We have loaded so much into the Truth Cart largely because we have wanted to have the same kind of certainty about our religious claims—down to rather obscure doctrinal issues—as we do about scientific claims. . . .

Over the years the church leadership and laity have also done our religion no favors by putting more in the cart than the cart could possibly bear. . . . Many of the things which trouble people are things that we probably should never have been all that dogmatic about in the first place. I find that a little humility about our doctrine, especially given the contingencies of its historical development, goes a long way in remaining satisfied with the whole. . . .

The CES Letter [formally, "Letter to a CES Director," which he cited as one of the online sources he had read] is emblematic of this all-or-nothing approach to religion. . . . The letter is nearly a perfect inverse of the version of Mormonism it is reacting to. Jeremy Runnels may have written the letter, but it was actually an inevitability—someone, sometime, somewhere was going to write that letter, because it was the obvious response to a certain style, tone, and mode of Mormonism that culminated in the highly doctrinaire, no-retreat-no-surrender positions taken by certain church leaders and members especially in the second half of the twentieth century. I would actually agree with the CES letter's basic notion, that the Mormonism it is responding to is unsustainable. Where I disagree is that I don't think the Mormonism it is responding to is actually the real, only, or inevitable Mormonism. Certainly, that was some people's Mormonism, but it's not my Mormonism, and I don't think it's the Mormonism that is going to endure in future decades and centuries.

"Some people choose to simply avoid the problems in church history. They like their narratives clean, simple. And unambiguously faith promoting. There is a certain attractiveness to that, and it may serve some individuals well. In the internet age, when information of all kinds is available with only a few key strokes, burying our heads in the sand is no longer viable (if it ever was). Even if you don't particularly care about ambiguities in church history, chances are that someone in your family or ward circle of friends will. Not everyone needs to be a scholar, but willful ignorance impedes our ability to minister to one another."

Terry Givens

From his fireside tour:

Q: I have a quote here from Brigham Young that says that you need to live polygamy in order to enter into the celestial kingdom. Yet you say that it isn't required.

A: The quotation you used is from the Journal of Discourses, and frankly the brethren back then liked to debate ideas and notions and much of it is foolish. Brigham Young said a lot of silly things. He also said at other times that plural marriage was not a requirement for salvation, and quotes Section 132 to that effect. We revere him as a prophet but we all know that these men are fallible. When Joseph Smith was introduced to the new church by the Lord in a revelation, He did so by saying that He had chosen Joseph to demonstrate what He could do “with the weak things of this world”. Why do we make them infallible? Joseph said “People say I am righteous. I am no such thing!” Moses probably committed murder, Abraham lied about his sister, Joseph Smith lied about having more than one wife, Brigham Young was racist. They are human. If that is our starting point we shouldn’t be too surprised.

on what it means to sustain:

<http://www.timesandseasons.org/index.php/2016/02/terryl-givens-on-what-it-means-to-sustain/>

I take “sustain” in that case to mean we support the general framework, share its common purposes, and work for its betterment. To sustain the elected leaders of a government would similarly mean to recognize their legitimately derived authority, and not work to undermine that authority, even if we voted for the other guy (or woman). So adapting this scriptural usage to the sustaining of our own leaders, I take the same cues. We recognize their legitimately derived authority. (This is made explicit in the temple interview questions. We affirm that they have the priesthood keys to administer in their office.) We pray for them and share their common purpose of building the kingdom, although we may not agree with or embrace their particular course of action at any given moment. But by recognizing their authority, and working within the parameters of kingdom governance to exert our influence on the church’s course in righteous ways, we can be faithful to our covenants even if dubious about particulars, and be true to our consciences at the same time.

On doubt:

“I know I am grateful for a propensity to doubt because it gives me the capacity to freely believe. I hope you can find your way to feel the same. The call to faith is a summons to engage the heart, to attune it to resonate in sympathy with principles and values and ideals that we devoutly hope are true and which we have reasonable but not certain grounds for believing to be true. There must be grounds for doubt as well as belief in order to render the choice more truly a choice, and therefore more deliberate and laden with more personal vulnerability and investment. An overwhelming preponderance of evidence on either side would make our choice as meaningless as would a loaded gun pointed at our heads. The option to believe must appear on one’s personal horizon like the fruit of paradise, perched precariously between sets of demands held in dynamic tension. Fortunately, in this world, one is always provided with sufficient materials out of which to fashion a life of credible conviction or dismissive denial. We are acted upon, in other words, by appeals to our personal values, our yearnings, our fears, our appetites, and our egos. What we choose to embrace, to be responsive to, is the purest reflection of who we are and what we love. That is why faith, the choice to believe, is, in the final analysis, an action that is positively laden with moral significance.”

“Doubt, if not suppressed or repressed, can be a fruitful catalyst to spiritual growth and discovery. To vilify doubt in all its forms has pernicious consequences. It can forestall progress, create testimonies of glass, and breed resentment. First, because it characterizes as sinful what is in many cases a fully legitimate and honorable response to the normal vicissitudes of our own spiritual equilibrium or to the inevitable eruptions of cognitive dissonance.”

Spencer J. Fluhman

“Importantly for my topic today, this information explosion has fundamentally changed how many Church members approach our religious past. For some, this has been exhilarating, since it has provided enhanced access, and with incredible speed, to an avalanche of information about LDS history and scripture. For many, though, this enhanced access has proven to be destabilizing, disorienting, or even corrosive to faith. I suspect most everyone listening today knows someone who has been troubled in their faith over what they’ve learned about our history. Whether it’s early LDS polygamy, or race and priesthood, or the Book of Abraham, or accounts of the First Vision, or issues of gender or

sexuality, it is not uncommon for 21st century Latter-day Saints to encounter information online that is either new or troubling, or both.”

"Is doubt like a cancerous disease that demands inoculation or quarantine or frenzied attempts at eradication? Perhaps not. It may be that doubt is simply the stuff of life. No one needs seek it out, after all. It finds all of us, at some level, at some point, much like pain or disappointment, I suspect. Without it, I wonder if real faith is even possible. I'm convinced that doubt is the foundation from which real faith can be defined and experienced."

Those who struggle with aspects of LDS history typically deal with more than questions about troubling content. Rather, it often becomes a matter of trust. They wonder why they were never told of this or that story, or of this or that detail. Many report finding it difficult to get straight answers, which only compounds their anxieties. Some have even been told by well-meaning leaders or friends to simply put their questions away, as if honest questions were themselves dangerous. They are sometimes left feeling isolated and alienated from their fellow Saints.

"I have watched with joy over the years as many of my conversation partners have successfully navigated complicated questions of history and faith. Every story is different and we all have unique experiences and needs, but I've seen some commonalities in those who make peace with the difficult elements in our past.

For one, they get comfortable with complexity and nuance. They went into their journey yearning for simple black-and-white answers but in the end many conclude that mortality sometimes provides only shades of grey on many subjects. Secondly, they get comfortable with the human side of Church experience. They come to see past Saints and leaders alike less as cardboard superhero cutouts—larger than life but two dimensional—and more like real people. For some, this humanizing view of past Saints actually makes them *more* compelling, not less. Instead of unreachable icons of piety or spirituality, they seem somehow more relatable in their humanity, somehow more usable as actual examples for struggling saints like you and me.

Thirdly, those who have successfully navigated these sometimes choppy waters come to think differently about history itself. By that I mean they get comfortable with the idea of change. They come to expect it, in fact. They come to see one's cultural and political and social contexts as mattering a great deal. They get comfortable with what history can and cannot prove. They come to realize that because the past is in many ways unavailable to us in the present, it is less like an exact science and more a matter of argument and interpretation. They conclude, in fact, that matters as fundamentally spiritual as the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith cannot be arbitrated by history alone. As Elder Neil L. Andersen wisely reminded us on Saturday afternoon (General Conference, October 2014), "the importance of Joseph [Smith's] work requires more than intellectual consideration."

Grant Hardy

<http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2016-fairmormon-conference/more-effective-apologetics>

I'm not sure it's always helpful to talk about crises of faith. Often what's bothering people is more along the lines of the crisis of expectations. Some Latter-day Saints were raised with fairly rigid notions of scriptural inerrancy, prophetic infallibility...A shift toward more realistic attitudes may be in order. It also can also be useful to remind people that you don't have to defend everything to be a Latter-day Saint. The list of essentials will vary from person to person. For me, for example, the Book of Mormon is central to my faith in a way that say polygamy or the Book of Abraham is not.

It's easy to over-claim. To imagine that the evidence for faith is simply overwhelming. That in turn may lead to naive confidence on the part of young people or students and then perhaps disappointment or confusion when members come across less well-known, more troubling aspects of our history and scriptures. You don't want to sow doubt. But at the same time, you don't want to foster a brittle, fragile kind of faith that may later crack under pressure.

For institutions, few of them will come off well if there's an assumption that any objectional details will discredit the whole enterprise. People are complicated and history is messy...Mormonism is (analogy borrowed from Melissa Inouye) less like a string of Christmas lights where one bad light will render the whole string dysfunctional and more like sourdough bread in which the components mix work together in a messy, organic way to create something wonderful.

So when I encounter anachronisms or other puzzling or problematic features of the Book of Mormon, rather than jumping to the conclusion that Joseph Smith must've been fraud, I ask what else might this mean? What might this tell us about God and his relations with his children?

The Old Testament is above all the story of a relationship, between Yahweh and his people. God chose Israel and called them to lives of holiness and justice, promising that through them he would bless the entire world. It was something of an up-and-down relationship, characterized by kindness and mercy on God's part, but also by frustration and even anger at sin and unfaithfulness...This is our story as well. As members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we don't have a monopoly on truth or on goodness (though we have quite a bit of both), but we have been called to be God's people in the latter days, to be holy and just, as he is, to be a light to the nations...Church leaders, the scriptures, and personal revelation provide a solid foundation, but we still have a lot to learn. Nevertheless, I believe that God is with us.

<http://mormonsundayschool.org/173-understanding-the-book-of-mormon-gospel-doctrine-lesson-0/>

I think the BOM could be a free translation with lots of modern elements. I think the BOM could be an amazingly free translation. But if there are still ancient Nephites and the translation came from God, then that matters a great deal. For instance, the movie 1776 which takes the story of the Declaration of Independence and puts it in Broadway Musical form... It's not just a translation it's like a whole different genre. That doesn't mean that Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson never lived. There is some sort of connection with it (actual history)...If we had a scholarly translation of what was on the gold plates coming out of perhaps Mesoamerica wherever that it came from, it might actually look quite different than the Book of Mormon that we have now, but the BOM that came through Joseph Smith is apparently the way that God wants it, and it's been very effective in being the founding document for a new religion.

Richard Bushman

<http://juvenileinstructor.org/notes-on-the-2008-bushman-seminar-part-1/>

"Increasingly teachers and church leaders at all levels are approached by Latter-day Saints who have lost confidence in Joseph Smith and the basic miraculous events of church history. They doubt the First Vision, the Book of Mormon, many of Joseph's revelations, and much besides. They fall into doubt after going on the Internet and finding shocking information about Joseph Smith based on documents and facts they had never heard before. A surprising number had not known about Joseph Smith's plural wives. They are set back by differences in the various accounts of the First Vision. They find that Egyptologists do not translate the Abraham manuscripts the way Joseph Smith did, making it appear that the Book of Abraham was a fabrication. When they come across this information in a critical book or read it on one of the innumerable critical Internet sites, they feel as if they had been introduced to a Joseph Smith and a Church history they had never known before. They undergo an experience like viewing the famous picture of a beautiful woman who in a blink of an eye turns into an old hag. Everything changes. What are they to believe?"

Often church leaders, parents, and friends, do not understand the force of this alternate view. Not knowing how to respond, they react defensively. They are inclined to dismiss all the evidence as anti-Mormon or of the devil. Stop reading these things if they upset you so much, the inquirer is told. Or go back to the familiar formula: scriptures, prayer, church attendance.

The troubled person may have been doing all of these things sincerely, perhaps even desperately. He or she feels the world is falling apart. Everything these inquirers put their trust in starts to crumble. They want guidance more than ever in their lives, but they don't seem to get it. The facts that have been presented to them challenge almost everything they believe. People affected in this way may indeed stop praying; they don't trust the old methods because they feel betrayed by the old system. Frequently they are furious. On their missions they fervently taught people about Joseph Smith without knowing any of these negative facts. Were they taken advantage of? Was the Church trying to fool them for its own purposes?

These are deeply disturbing questions. They shake up everything. Should I stay in the Church? Should I tell my family? Should I just shut up and try to get along? Who can help me?

At this point, these questioners go off in various directions. Some give up on the Church entirely. They find another religion or, more likely these days, abandon religion altogether. Without their familiar Mormon God, they are not sure there is any God at all. They become atheist or agnostic. Some feel the restrictions they grew up with no longer apply. The strength has been drained out of tithing, the Word of Wisdom, and chastity. They partly welcome the new freedom of their agnostic condition. Now they can do anything they please without fear of breaking the old Mormon rules. The results may not be happy for them or their families.

Others piece together a morality and a spiritual attitude that stops them from declining morally, but they are not in an easy place. When they go to church, they are not comfortable. Sunday School classes and Sacrament meeting talks about Joseph Smith and the early church no longer ring true. How can these people believe these “fairy tales,” the inquirers ask. Those who have absorbed doses of negative material live in two minds: their old church mind which now seems naive and credulous, and their new enlightened mind with its forbidden knowledge learned on the internet and from critical books.

Here are some of the characteristics of people who have passed through this ordeal but managed to revive most of their old beliefs.

1. They often say they learned the Prophet was human. They don't expect him to be a model of perfect deportment as they once thought. He may have taken a glass of wine from time to time, or scolded his associates, or even have made business errors. They see his virtues and believe in his revelations but don't expect perfection.
2. They also don't believe he was led by revelation in every detail. They see him as learning gradually to be a prophet and having to feel his way at times like most Church members. In between the revelations, he was left to himself to work out the methods of complying with the Lord's commandments. Sometimes he had to experiment until he found the right way.
3. These newly revived Latter-day Saints also develop a more philosophical attitude toward history. They come to see (like professional historians) that facts can have many interpretations. Negative facts are not necessarily as damning as they appear at first sight. Put in another context along side other facts, they do not necessarily destroy Joseph Smith's reputation.
4. Revived Latter-day Saints focus on the good things they derive from their faith—the community of believers, the comforts of the Holy Spirit, the orientation toward the large questions of life, contact with God, moral discipline, and many others. They don't want to abandon these good things. Starting from that point of desired belief, they are willing to give Joseph Smith and the doctrine a favorable hearing. They may not be absolutely certain about every item, but they are inclined to see the good and the true in the Church. “

<https://medium.com/@jellistx/transcript-of-claudia-and-richard-bushmans-remarks-at-faith-again-e9d03bdea0e3#.d7cfum8zw>

I think for the Church to remain strong it has to reconstruct its narrative. The dominant narrative is not true. It can't be sustained. The Church has to absorb all this new information or it will be on very shaky grounds, and that's what it's trying to do. And there will be a strain for a lot of people, older people especially. But I think it has to change. Elder Packer had the sense of “protecting the little people.” He felt like the scholars were an enemy to his faith, and that (we should protect) the grandmothers living in Sanpete County. That was a very lovely pastoral image. But the price of protecting the grandmothers was the loss of the grandsons. They got a story that didn't work. So we've just had to change our narrative.

Podcast interview with Bill Reel:

<http://www.mormondiscussionpodcast.org/2015/11/perspectives-richard-bushman/>

Bill Reel: We say “the church is true” a lot and it rubs some people the wrong way. What does it mean in the context of understanding the messiness of church history that call into question absolute truth claims, etc? Is it an exclusive thing? What does it mean to you to say the “church is true?”

Richard Bushman: I think the most fundamental meaning is that God is in this work. And he’s helping us when we try to serve in the church and try to bless our brothers and sisters. That he’s helping the leaders of the church guide the church along and in general we’re on the side of our Heavenly Father when we’re part of the church and what I think it doesn’t mean or I’m sure it doesn’t mean is that no one else in the world can come to God without the church. I mean we’re really only a fraction of one percent of the world’s population, and I can’t imagine a God who wouldn’t have any interest in other people or that they would be living vain lives until they run into Mormonism. I have evangelical friends who are probably stronger followers of Christ than I am and I would think when they went to heaven God would certainly welcome them and that people all over the world can be uplifted spiritually that God is working with them and answering their prayers, so it isn’t really a matter of salvation, I don’t think. It’s ostensibly that we have God with us in our work. I would add one other thing. When I hear the statement that the church is true we normally put the emphasis on the word true but I would put the emphasis on the word church because I think what we do have is we have particular missions that we can do as a church that may be distinctive or that we may be particularly good at and ours is producing people of good will. People that grow up as Mormons learn to be generous with their time. They learn to sacrifice, they learn to get along with other people, to respect other people’s feelings, to avoid competition in striving to get ahead and I think those are wonderful gifts that come to us through our church experience, and I do think we have a mission to carry out that goodwill into every area of our lives. Into board rooms and playing fields and stages and classrooms wherever we go. We should be the people of good will.

Bill Reel: In the scriptures, you have God doing awful things like genocide, etc. Is it OK to take a position, like these people are trying to explain things the best they can, but who knows if God is really the author of the harm to people that is attributed to him through scripture.

Richard Bushman: Yeah, I would take a position very much like that, but I would also say we have to try to understand why people would write that scripture that way, what is it, what kind of life situation leads you to feel that God is helping you to destroy your enemy and appreciate there are some people’s lives so desperate, so harried, so pressured, so hopeless that they can only find satisfaction with a God who is going to avenge themselves from their enemies. You think of the ways the Jews were treated in Germany, and you use see people wiped out that way you get in an apocalyptic frame of mind and you want God to step in and punish these people, and one of the ways that religion services people is to relieve the anxiety and the anger they have by displacing it onto God, so it’s not that they’re wrong or evil but they’re using religion to help them in their life situation. I want to be very empathetic to people who talk that way.

Some years ago if someone told me the Book of Mormon wasn’t historically accurate, that it was some kind of modern creation, I would have thought they were heretical. I wouldn’t say that anymore. I think there are faithful Mormons who are unwilling to take a stand on the historicity. I disagree with them, I think it is a historical book, but I recognize that a person can be committed to the gospel in every way and still have questions about the Book of Mormon....I know people of that kind (LDS who don’t take the BOM as historical). And they are very good people.

Ask me Anything event on Reddit:

https://www.reddit.com/r/latterdaysaints/comments/3dnmfn/richard_bushman_ama_3_pm_to_6_pm_eastern_time/

"The leadership were not entirely informed of history for many years, but recently they have had to get up to speed. The recent Church historians have done a great job of informing the Brethren. The gospel topics were a surprise to many. They are often charged with concealing the truth. I think the fact is the old narrative was all they knew. I don't think that all believe we have to tell the whole story. Why bring all that up they are wont to say. But those on the side of transparency are prevailing."

"We are in a period of transition with regard to our history. The narrative is in the process of reconstruction. Right now that means there is the standard, comforting story, and then a series of controversies. Teachers are wondering how many of the surprises can be brought up in Sunday School without disrupting the spiritual purposes of the class. In time I think this problem will go away. All the controversial questions will be absorbed into the standard narrative and we won't have a sense of two tracks. We will explain that Joseph Smith looked in a hat to translate just as now we say he looked in a stone box to find the gold plates. There are already lots of surprising things in the standard narrative. We will simply flesh that out. We must, however, not relent in getting all this material included. We want the story we tell each other to be based on the best possible historical evidence. Any shrinking from that mandate will only lead to more problems down the road. I think the Church is trying to create that kind of comprehensive, accurate narrative. In a few years there won't be any more surprises."

Dr. Bushman's testimony:

A few weeks ago during one of the seminars that Terry and Fiona Givens and I have been offering for people working through their doubts and questions, an old friend sat me down during the lunch break, looked me in the eye and asked, "Richard, do you believe Joseph Smith saw the Father and the Son in the grove?" I said of course and the moment passed, but his question lingered on and moved me to think again about what I do believe about the founding stories. I am very much impressed by Joseph Smith's 1832 History account of his early visions. This is the one partially written in his own hand and the rest dictated to Frederick G. Williams. I think it is more revealing than the official account presumably written in 1838 and contained in the Pearl of Great Price. We don't know who wrote the 1838 account. Joseph's journal indicates that he, Sidney Rigdon, and George Robinson collaborated on beginning the history in late April, but we don't know who actually drafted the history. It is a polished narrative but unlike anything Joseph ever wrote himself. The 1832 history we know is his because of the handwriting. It comes rushing forth from Joseph's mind in a gush of words that seem artless and uncalculated, a flood of raw experience. I think this account has the marks of an authentic visionary experience. There is the distance from God, the perplexity and yearning for answers, the perplexity, and then the experience itself which brings intense joy, followed by fear and anxiety. Can he deal with the powerful force he has encountered? Is he worthy and able? It is a classic announcement of a prophet's call, and I find it entirely believable..

I also believe the statements of the witnesses to the gold plates. ...I am inclined to accept the witness statements at face value. The strength of the testimonies, in my opinion, is also increased by the numbers. It was not just a single individual who said he saw them but eleven persons. That impresses me. Where do we have better attestation of a supernatural event?

I also believe Joseph Smith had access to Egyptian characters. The transcripts he prepared for Martin Harris to take to the linguists have a pretty firm provenance...

Those are little pieces, but they indicate how I feel about the founding events. I am also impressed by the Book of Mormon. It is riddled with nineteenth-century Protestant theology and phrasing, but still is an incredible narrative of a civilization's rise and fall. A few years ago in a class on contemporary Mormonism that Claudia and I were teaching at Columbia, one of the students asked me do you believe the Book of Mormon. I said that it was an incredibly complicated book that worked on many different levels. In my opinion, it was either a work of genius or inspired, and knowing what I do about Joseph Smith, I don't believe he was capable of writing it. I really don't know how the published text relates to the text on the plates, considering that Joseph did not look at the plates as he dictated the book. There are various ways of explaining that, but I do think the Book of Mormon is a marvelous creation and far beyond Joseph Smith's natural powers in 1829.

So what it comes down to is that I believe in the founding events. I think of them as the foundation of my faith. But they are the foundation, and I do not live in the cellar. I live in the rooms built on these events, the way of life, the attitudes, the institutions, the relationships, the experiences they support. This is what I meant when I spoke to Anselm Min, the Catholic theologian at Claremont Graduate School where Claudia and I taught for three years. Anselm took me to lunch soon after we arrived at Claremont and bluntly asked me how I could believe in Joseph Smith. My immediate response was that when I lived in the Mormon way I became the kind of man I wanted to be. Those words summed up a lot—my sense of having God's spirit when I needed it, the salutary discipline of Mormon life, the friendships and commonalities of a Mormon ward, the requirement of unselfish service, the valuation of family, the tempering of pride and fear—a host of things. Like many people, I wrestle with demons. I frequently feel inadequate to my responsibilities. At the same time, I know I can be better, and when I live the Mormon way, I am lifted up. I see things more clearly. I can figure out

how I really feel. I know how to relate to my wife and children and colleagues. I am temperate, incisive, generous, and focused. On bad days, Claudia and I often say we are out of sync with the universe. Over the many years I have been in the Church, I find that following the Mormon path puts me back in sync. I don't use the word "know" a lot, but I do know I am a better person for being a Mormon.

Adam Miller

Books: "Letters to a Young Mormon", "Future Mormon: Essays in Mormon Theology"

Is the church true? This is an old question, a question that had a meaningful home in the context of nineteenth century American sectarianism. But for us, it seems, the question may be poorly posed. It doesn't capture, I think, what is at stake for my children in their exposure to Mormonism and, more, it seems ill-suited to the kind of existential burn that might compel us, even today, to ask it. It seems like a bad fit for the kind of answer we're generally after in a white-knuckled prayer. It's not that the question is "wrong" or that it couldn't be answered affirmatively. The problem is that it's too thin. In a twenty-first century context—in a world driven by big data, neo-liberalism, and global capitalism—it's not a load-bearing question. It's too narrow a thing to support, all by itself, the weight of the lives we put at stake in asking it. "Is the church true?" Framed like this, the basic religious question is an institutional question. It's the kind of question that an institution would teach its members to ask about that institution.

Rather than asking if the church is true, ask something like: Is this the body of Christ? Is Christ manifest here? Does his blood flow in these veins? Does his spirit breathe in these lungs? Does forgiveness flourish here? Is faith strengthened? Is hope enlivened? Is charity practiced? Can I see, here, the body of Christ?

Don't obsess about whether the church is true. Make it true.

Given my careful, decades-long cultivation for doubt and skepticism, still even in that context it would be dishonest and in bad faith to say that regardless of how unlikely some of these beliefs are something very real and powerful and real is happening to me in the pew on Sunday when I bring myself back again. When I come back, again. When I kneel down, again. When I read the Book of Mormon, again. Regardless of all my skepticism of all the different kinds of questions we could raise, something is happening to me in a substantial, first person way that I can't deny regardless of what doubts I have of these peripheral, historical third person questions. The pull for that is sufficiently strong that there's no place else for me to go.