

Hermetically Sealed Systems in LDS Thought

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Introduction

A [hermetic seal](#) is one which is entirely airtight. A hermetically sealed system of thought is, by analogy, one which is cutoff from, or virtually impervious to, outside ways of thinking.

Generally, a hermetically sealed system of thought is created when a person accepts one or more assumptions (sometimes unawares) which then prevent them from ever arriving at conclusions *outside* the resulting system of thought. From within the system it appears that the full range of choices and possibilities are available, but the thought structure makes some conclusions virtually inaccessible.



A hermetically sealed vial of neon gas.
http://www.elementsales.com/photo/np2016/rda-gasgeneric-1_np.JPG

Likely present across humanity in various forms, hermetically sealed systems of thought are frequently found in [totalistic groups](#) that use [thought-reform](#) techniques (especially milieu control, mystical manipulation, sacred science, loading the language, doctrine over person, and dispensing of existence) to one degree or another. Consider these extreme examples from [Scientology](#) and the [Jehovah's Witnesses](#). [The glossary of undue influence](#) lists various psychological techniques that are also closely related to or used in conjunction with hermetically sealed systems of thought within totalistic groups.

Examples from other groups

It is usually easier to spot hermetically sealed systems of thought in groups of which a person is not a member. Here are two very simple, straightforward examples from the Jehovah's Witnesses organization:

Assumed: To love God means to entirely avoid communication with a former Jehovah's Witness.

Inaccessible: Exposure to criticism from former Jehovah's Witnesses.

Example:

...should we listen to apostates, read their literature, or examine their Web sites on the Internet? If we love God and the truth, we will not do so. We should not allow apostates into our homes or even greet them, for such actions would make us 'sharers in their wicked works.' (2 John 9-11) ([source](#))

Assumed: You will miss the good and only see bad if you focus on the flaws of the organization or leaders.

Inaccessible: Aspects of the organization or the actions or teachings of some leaders may be ethically deficient but may be un-observable if one only focuses on the good.

Example:

Every person in this organization—every one of Jehovah’s Witnesses including the governing body—we’re all imperfect and thus we are subject to making mistakes. Which means that if you look hard enough, all you will see instead of seeing these amazing things that Jehovah is accomplishing and our tremendous privilege of being part of it, all we are going to see is the errors of men. But when we focus on the good, on the guidance and loving support that we’ve received, aren’t we moved with appreciation to cleave to this body of fellow worshipers. And just look at what Jehovah is accomplishing by means of his imperfect servants. There is no other organization on earth providing spiritual food like the one that we belong to. When we look at all of this, how could we possibly let the failings of just a few people undermine this overwhelming proof of Jehova’s backing? (From the [2016 “Remain Loyal To Jehovah” regional convention](#))



Structure and Veracity

These diagrams say nothing (directly) about how well these systems of thought coincide with reality. However, examining the systems of thought in this form may make it easier for the reader to determine if the systems are veridical (i.e., coincide with reality).

Structure and Agency

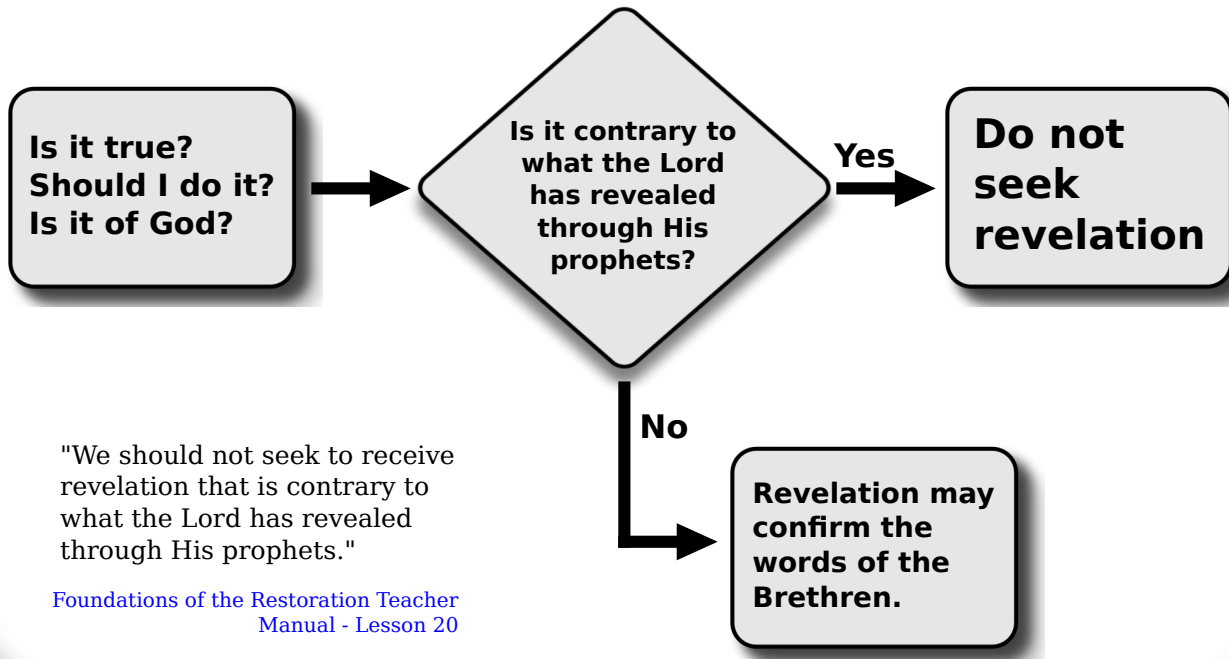
Regardless of whether these systems of thought are veridical, their structure may demonstrate aspects of LDS thought which do not allow members and investigators the full latitude of thought to consider alternative conclusions. Given the preeminence of agency in LDS thought, members and leaders may wish to reconsider how some teachings are presented or structured.

Hermetically sealed systems of LDS thought

[diagrams follow]

A Hermetically Sealed System (#1)

**Do not seek revelation on that
which contradicts the Brethren**

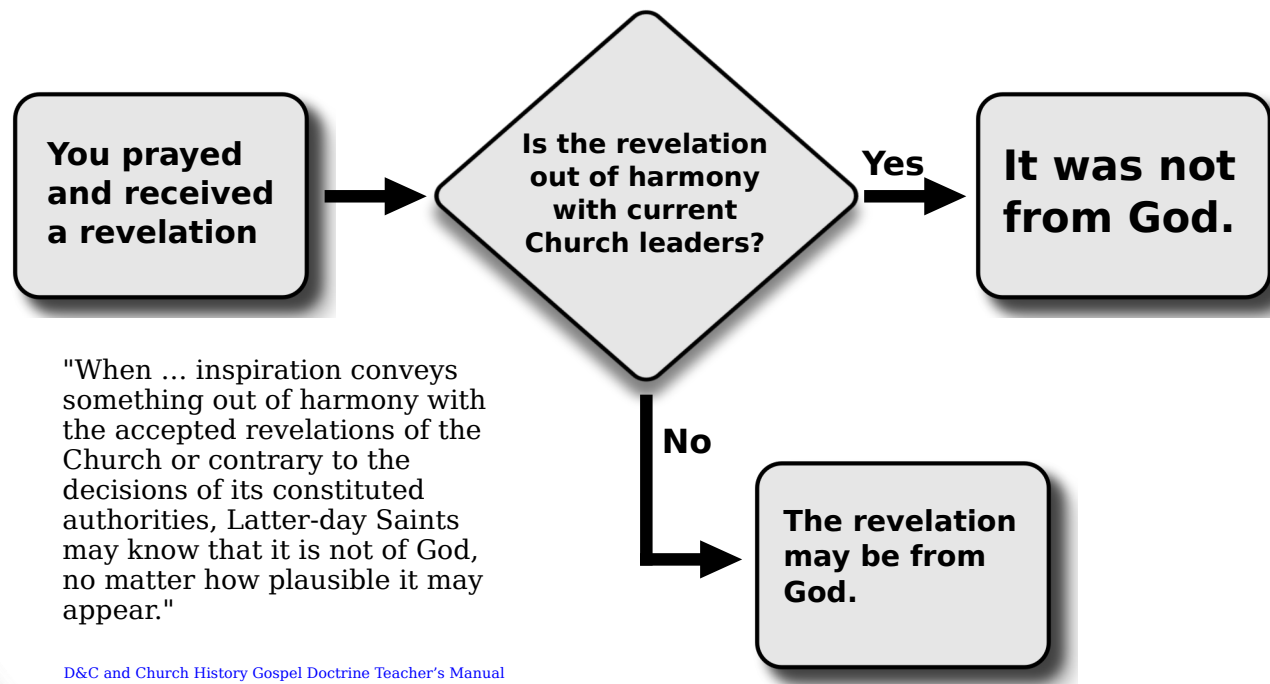


INACCESSIBLE

**Perhaps a revelation
from God may
contradict what was
purportedly revealed
to LDS leadership.**

A Hermetically Sealed System (#2)

Revelations contradicting the Brethren are not from God



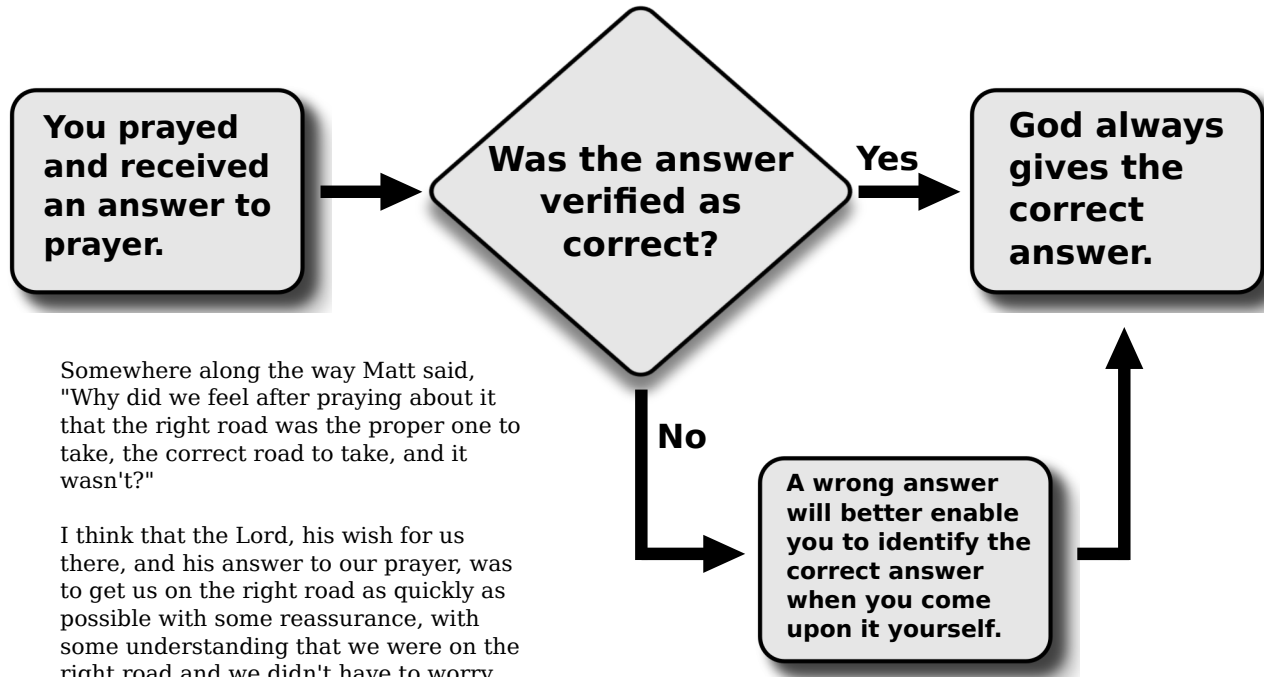
D&C and Church History Gospel Doctrine Teacher's Manual
Lesson 6: "I Will Tell You in Your Mind and in Your Heart, by the Holy Ghost"

INACCESSIBLE

**Perhaps a person
may receive
revelation from God
which contradicts
the decisions of the
current leadership.**

A Hermetically Sealed System (#3)

All answers to prayer are correct



Somewhere along the way Matt said, "Why did we feel after praying about it that the right road was the proper one to take, the correct road to take, and it wasn't?"

I think that the Lord, his wish for us there, and his answer to our prayer, was to get us on the right road as quickly as possible with some reassurance, with some understanding that we were on the right road and we didn't have to worry about it.

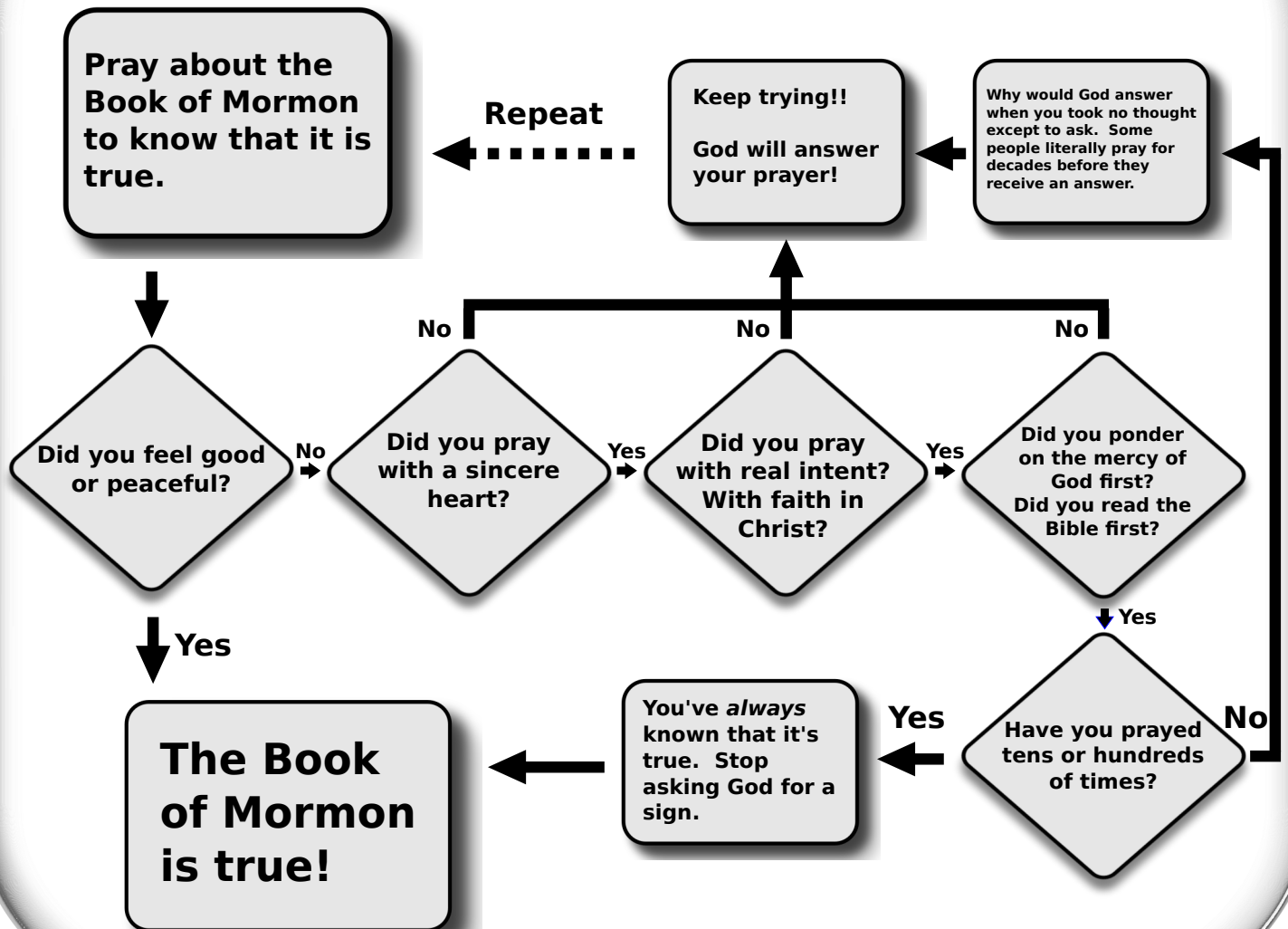
[Elder Jefferey R. Holland](#)
[Mormon Message: Wrong Roads](#)

INACCESSIBLE

Perhaps an answer to prayer may be wrong.

A Hermetically Sealed System (#4)

**Follow Moroni's Promise to know
that the Book of Mormon is true**



INACCESSIBLE

Perhaps the
Book of Mormon
is a modern
document.

A Hermetically Sealed System (#5)

Only the ignorant and proud disagree with accepted LDS doctrine

Someone varies with accepted LDS doctrine.

Among the Latter-day Saints, the preaching of false doctrines disguised as truths of the gospel, may be expected from people of two classes, and practically from these only; they are:

First—The hopelessly ignorant, whose lack of intelligence is due to their indolence and sloth, who make but feeble effort, if indeed any at all, to better themselves by reading and study; those who are afflicted with a dread disease that may develop into an incurable malady—laziness.

Second—The proud and self-vaunting ones, who read by the lamp of their own conceit; who interpret by rules of their own contriving; who have become a law unto themselves, and so pose as the sole judges of their own doings. More dangerously ignorant than the first.

Beware of the lazy and the proud.

Teachings of Presidents of the Church:
Joseph F. Smith, (2011), 113-21

Is the person extremely knowledgeable on the topic?

Yes

They are proud and self-vaunting and read by the lamp of their own conceit.

No

They are hopelessly ignorant due to their indolence and sloth.

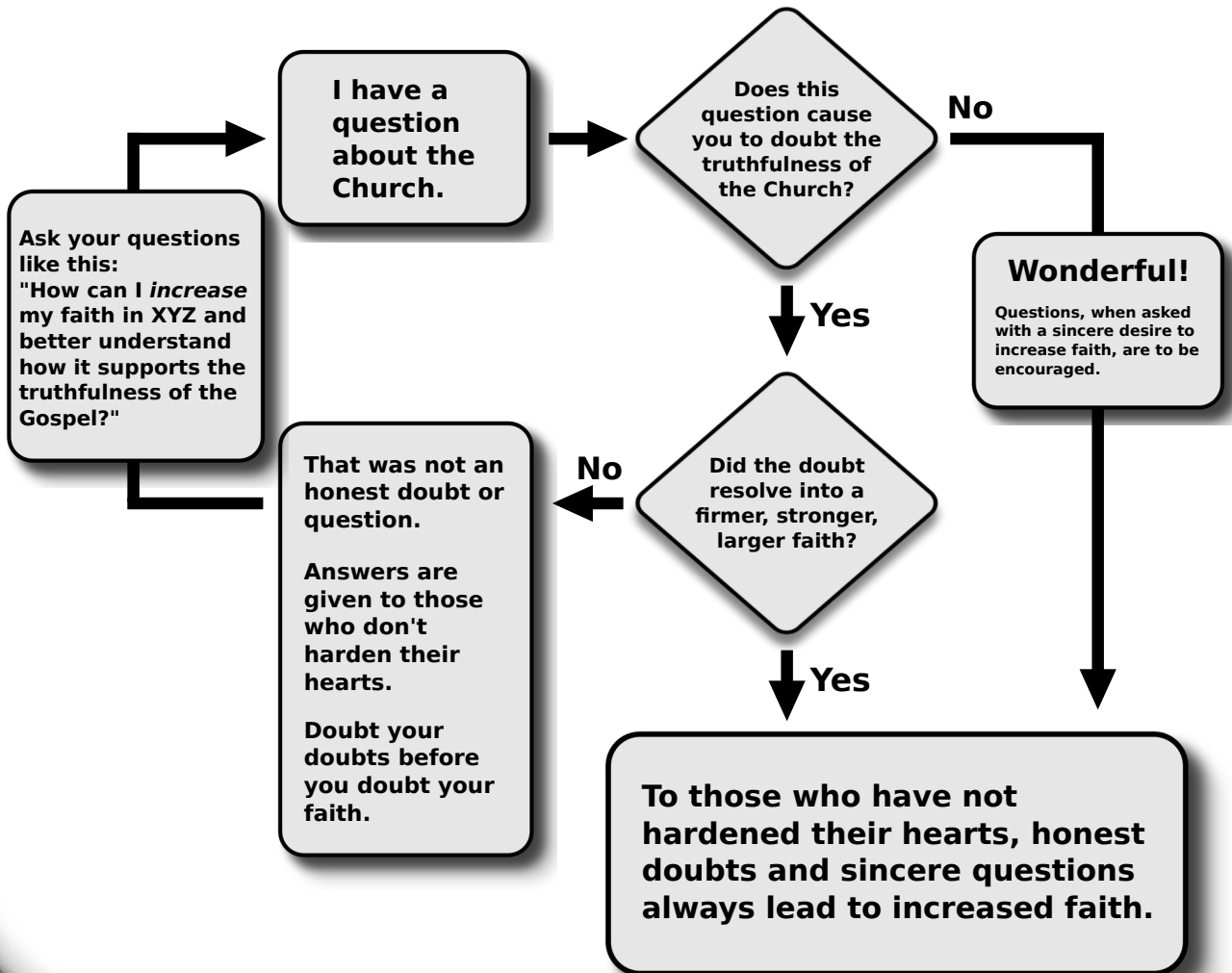
Beware the lazy and the proud—both are ignorant.

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Perhaps an informed, humble, spiritually-minded person may justifiably be at odds with accepted LDS doctrine.

A Hermetically Sealed System (#6)

Ask the right questions and doubt your doubts



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Perhaps questioning the truth-claims of the Church is appropriate at times and honest questions may, perhaps, lead to answers which do not necessarily increase faith in the Church's truth-claims.

Supplement to Hermetically Sealed System #4

Follow Moroni's Promise to know that the Book of Mormon is true

Did you feel good or peaceful? Did you pray with a sincere heart? Did you pray with real intent? With faith in Christ? Did you ponder on the mercy of God first? Did you read the Bible first?

[Moroni 10:3–5](#)

3 Behold, I would exhort you that when ye shall read these things, if it be wisdom in God that ye should read them, that ye would remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam even down until the time that ye shall receive these things, and ponder it in your hearts.

4 And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.

5 And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things.

["Praying with Real Intent"](#) Ensign, Feb 2016.

One afternoon they [the missionaries] asked me, "Have you prayed to find out if what we are teaching you is true?"

I told them I had but had not obtained any answer.

"You must pray with real intent," they said.

Why would God answer when you took no thought except to ask.

[Doctrine & Covenants 9:7](#)

7 Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me.

Have you prayed tens or hundreds of times? Keep trying!! God will answer your prayer! May take many years.

["Securing Our Testimonies"](#). Donald L. Staheli. General Conference, Oct 2004.

Recently I had an engaging conversation with a young man who was contemplating a mission. As we talked, it became apparent that he was struggling with his decision, because he was questioning the strength of

his testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He wanted to know why he had not received more clear answers to his prayers and study of the scriptures.

...First, we must have a sincere desire to believe. Phrases such as “awake,” “arouse your faculties,” “experiment,” and “exercise a particle of faith” are action words that suggest sustained effort on our part.

...To my young friend, and to all wherever you may be, never give up on the Lord. The answer to your prayers may not be as clear or as timely as you would like, but keep praying.

[lds subreddit](#)

I've gone to church the last two Sundays and I think it's fantastic. I really like a lot of the ideals of the church. I'm already living by the word of wisdom, and I'm following the commandments, and reading the scriptures, and I'm praying. I keep waiting for an answer, anything. But I'm not getting a thing. *The missionaries say to keep praying, and to pray with more specific questions*, but no matter what I try I'm just not getting any answers.

[lds subreddit](#)

If you keep trying, things will only get better. Keep pushing forward and remember; the amount of effort you give is more important than the amount of success.... Don't stop praying and have patience.

[lds subreddit](#)

Keep praying, I didn't get an answer for 15 years...

You've *always* known that it's true. Stop asking God for a sign.

[“What You Knew in the Premortal Life”](#). New Era. Sep 2015.

I can remember sitting in the back row of the chapel as the instructor began teaching about the Prophet Joseph Smith. I'll never forget it. It was a riveting moment of clarity. I was completely tuned in to the story. As it culminated and the teacher bore testimony, I knew that I knew it was true. I just knew it. But more importantly, I realized that I'd always known it was true; this was just the first time I'd realized it.

If you're trying to gain a testimony of the Church, don't be tempted to think, like Laman and Lemuel, that “the Lord maketh no such thing[s] known unto [you]” ([1 Nephi 15:9](#)). Don't think that receiving such a testimony is beyond your reach. These tempting lies could never be true.

Gaining a testimony isn't about learning something new or even finding something that you've never known. It's about understanding your

divine identity and remembering the things that you've always known to be true.

["You've always known."](#) New Era, June 2006.

I believed that Heavenly Father and [Jesus Christ](#) had spoken to Joseph Smith when he was 14, so I thought that since I was now 14, Heavenly Father could tell me, too. I didn't expect a vision, but I believed God would somehow let me know if this was His Church. I decided that as soon as the testimony meeting ended, I would go a little ways from the lodge among the trees to kneel and pray as Joseph had.

During the meeting, I listened intently to the testimonies, and I recognized that the Spirit was very strong. My sister's friend stood to bear his testimony. As he said the words, "I know the Church is true and that God lives," I heard a still, small voice whisper within me: "You know it's true, too. You've always known." Tears filled my eyes because I knew God had heard my prayer before I had even spoken it.

["I Wanted Proof."](#) New Era, Feb 1998.

After reading the Book of Mormon, I knelt in prayer. I had a great desire to know of its truth. I hoped it was true, knowing what joy this would bring me. That night I prayed for hours desiring to know. The following nights I continued in my prayers and began to wonder if I would receive a witness.

My determination in waiting for a witness was a trial of my faith. After many days I came to the realization that I knew the Book of Mormon was true. It came not as a sign or a voice. I knew because in the center of my being I could not deny that it was true. I also knew that God existed and that he is my Heavenly Father, that Jesus Christ is the only begotten son of God.

This came to me, not as new knowledge, but as a peaceful remembrance of that which I already knew. I did not need a further witness. I had always known the truth. My pride in my own knowledge had caused me to forget my testimony.

["Is It True?"](#) New Era, Feb 1999.

I had already read the Book of Mormon several times, both with my family and on my own. Every time I read it, I would pray to know if the words I received were true. I never felt like I received a firm answer to those prayers, and over time I grew more and more discouraged. I was afraid that not receiving that witness meant that the Church wasn't true.

But I was determined to try again. I began reading the Book of Mormon again, studying and pondering it as I had never done before. Near the end of the fall semester at college, I finished the Book of Mormon. I sat on my bed and thought a lot about how I should go about asking again.

Tears flowed down my cheeks as the fear of not being answered crept over me. I prayed to Heavenly Father and told Him how I was on my own now and needed a witness that the Book of Mormon was true. At the end of my prayer I waited and waited, but once again, no answer came. I felt a deep weakening in my heart, and I cried because once again my prayers seemed to have failed.

The next morning I attended my religion class. My teacher began to talk about prayer. In the course of his lecture he said, "Don't ask the Lord a question you already know the answer to." I immediately felt the Spirit, and three words entered my mind, "You already know." I realized that I already knew that the Church and the Book of Mormon were true. My mind filled with thoughts of how I knew it was true. I thought about the joy the gospel had brought into my life. I thought of the peace and happiness that I always felt when I was living the commandments. I thought of the many times I had felt the Spirit.

Now if I get discouraged as I work to build a testimony of my own, I remember the joy the gospel has brought me throughout my life. I remember the times I have felt the Spirit. And I don't discount the subtle reassurances I have felt of the gospel's truth.

[Example of how such an approach influenced one seeker: ["Don't ask the Lord a question you already know the answer to."](#)]

Don't ever accept no for an answer...Ask 3 or 4 times in different ways.

[Utah Areas Annual Mission Presidents Seminar](#). Sep 2015.

[Depicts the general attitude of missionaries to negative responses to any part of their message or invitations to make the next commitment.]

They will get to yes one no at a time: a. *Don't ever accept no for an answer.* b. Help them build faith beyond the first no. c. *Ask three or four times in different ways.* d. Do something positively different (e.g. after the last no, ask if "we can sing you a song" or "show you a picture of their family") after the third or fourth no.

Supplement to Hermetically Sealed System #6

Ask the right questions and doubt your doubts

Honest doubts lead to increased faith.

[“What do Do When You Have Questions”](#). Ensign. May 2012 (quoting Howard W. Hunter, Oct 1960 General Conference; Also quoted in Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Howard W. Hunter, ch 21). Emphasis added.

I have sympathy for young men and young women when *honest doubts* enter their minds and they engage in the great conflict of resolving doubts. *These doubts can be resolved, if they have an honest desire to know the truth*, by exercising moral, spiritual, and mental effort. *They will emerge from the conflict into a firmer, stronger, larger faith because of the struggle*. They have gone from a simple, trusting faith, through doubt and conflict, into a solid substantial faith which ripens into testimony.

Answers given to those who don't harden their hearts.

[“A Pattern for Learning Spiritual Things”](#). Seminaries and Institutes of Religion Satellite Broadcast. August 7, 2012 (quoted in Lesson 10: Seek Truth, Foundations of the Restoration Teacher Manual).

Answers to spiritual questions are given to individuals who don't harden their hearts; who ask in faith, believing they will receive; and who diligently keep the commandments.

Ask the right kind of questions.

[“Will You Engage in the Wrestle?”](#). Sheri Dew. BYU Idaho Devotional.

As seekers of truth, our safety lies in asking the right questions, in faith, and of the right sources—meaning those who only speak truth: such as the scriptures, prophets, and the Lord through the Holy Ghost.

[“What to Do When You Have Questions.”](#) Youth article on lds.org (visited 2017-01-31).

There are basically two different ways we can approach our questions. For our purposes here, we'll distinguish between these approaches by labeling them *questioning* and *asking questions*. When it comes to matters of faith, there can be a pretty big difference between the two. The difference has to do with how and why you're asking the questions, what you hope to gain from them, and where they'll eventually lead you.

Questioning, here, refers to challenging, disputing, or picking something apart. When it comes to religion, the result of this approach is often not to find answers but rather to find fault and destroy confidence.

On the other hand, in religion, just as in science or anything else worth studying, it's absolutely essential to *ask questions*, even difficult ones. It's the only way you'll get answers. And answers mean greater knowledge and understanding—and in the case of religion, greater faith and spirituality.

So, your attitude and your motive in asking a question can make all the difference in where it will eventually lead you. For instance, if you're studying the scriptures and come across a passage that seems to contradict a Church teaching or a scientific or historical fact, there's a big difference between asking "How could the scriptures (or the Church) possibly be true if ... ?" and asking "What's the full context of this passage and what does it mean in light of ... ?" The first question may lead you to a hastily drawn conclusion based on skepticism and doubt rather than actual knowledge or logic, whereas the second is more likely to lead you to greater insight and faith.

Sincere questions lead to greater faith.

["When Doubts and Questions Arise"](#). Ensign. March 2015.

Questions, when asked with a sincere desire to increase one's understanding and faith, are to be encouraged...

Sincere questions are those asked with the "real intent" (Moroni 10:4) to better understand and more fully obey the will of the Lord... There is no suggestion in the scriptures or the teachings of the prophets that encourages doubt.

Doubts occur because you are sinning.

["When Doubts and Questions Arise"](#). Ensign. March 2015.

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.

Letting your doubts justify your sins is never a successful substitute for repenting.

Doubt your doubts

["Come, Join with Us"](#). Dieter F. Uchtdorf. Oct 2013 General Conference.

... doubt your doubts before you doubt your faith.