

To peek behind the curtain: the decision to critically investigate LDS truth-claims

bwv549

2016-11-01

Why *not* investigate?

From the perspective of a believing member, there are many valid reasons to *avoid* critically¹ investigating the truth-claims of the Church.²

Lack the time, energy, interest, or capability

To investigate requires time and effort. Most members are busy raising a family and have many demands on their time and focus. Maybe now is just not a good time?³

Other members may feel that a thorough investigation is too far outside their abilities. A person who has not spent time in their education or employment assessing data or arguments is likely to be reluctant to engage in critical investigation.⁴

Predetermined irrelevance

Some members may be so committed to particular facets of the Gospel (say, the Book of Mormon or the happiness they feel in a community of Saints) that the question of

¹The word “critical” can be used in two ways: the most common definition is “inclined to find fault or to judge with severity, often too readily”. The second is “involving analysis of the merits and faults of a work”. I am referring to the second definition in this document.

²I think reasons given to *not* investigate are, for the most part, very valid. I think I understand them, and I can empathize with those who choose not to investigate. For the first 20 years of my adult life I tended to avoid reading direct arguments against the Church. So, even though I read broadly about Church issues, I generally worked my way through issues beginning with the apologetic side first to ensure there was already a response in hand. And when people came to me with doubts or questions I invariably looked primarily for the answer to their problem (i.e., how do I make this work?), rather than trying to weigh the merit of their question or position on its own terms. As a person who avoided investigation for decades, I cannot really criticize anyone who would rather not investigate or would rather not investigate right now.

³“To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.” (Ecc 3:1).

⁴The content of this point was taken from or influenced by feedback from the reddit user [Anti-Mormon-Moroni](#).

whether the truth-claims stand up to scrutiny feels completely irrelevant to them.⁵

For example, some feel that their initial examination of the Church is enough to merit their lifelong devotion. They know that living the Church lifestyle generally makes people happy and that is enough for them. They would rather focus on *living* the Church than on finding information that might detract from their happiness and the happiness of those around them.

Become vulnerable to loss or change

To investigate is to open oneself up to potential loss or change in at least two significant ways:

Loss/damage of past and future meaning.

The following are the major ways in which a person’s entire understanding of their past and present purpose and meaning may be altered through investigation:

	Before Investigation	If one leaves or loses faith in the Church due to investigation AND...	
		<i>Church is <u>not</u> True</i>	<i>Church is True</i>
Meaning of one’s past life	Well-defined <i>Engaged in building the kingdom through Church activity and consecration.</i>	Somewhat questionable <i>At least some of what may have been justified if the Church were true may now be viewed as a waste of resources or even harmful.</i>	Somewhat questionable <i>Potentially misjudge the value of your past service and devotion.</i>
Certainty when making choices	Yes <i>Through the feelings of the Spirit or following the Brethren.</i>	Some <i>Assurance through self, friends, family, and/or principles.</i>	Stupor of thought <i>Potential loss of the Spirit and faith in leaders when they are essential to making good choices</i>
Meaning of one’s future life	Well-defined <i>Church programs, service, and missions, where value is mostly predetermined.</i>	Undefined <i>Can engage in virtually any activity or none at all; meaning is more self-defined.</i>	Likely misery and darkness <i>Likely never to find peace, joy, or meaning in the same way before loss of faith.</i>
Life after death	Eternal life <i>Eternal family relationships and growth continue.</i>	Uncertain <i>Life may simply cease at death</i>	Damnation or Outer Darkness <i>Progression potentially limited; potential annihilation</i>

Figure 1: Major consequences of critical investigation of the LDS Church’s truth-claims

Some examples might include a re-assessment of the value of having paid large amounts of tithing and the manner in which a person treated “wayward” family members.⁶

⁵The content of this point was taken from or influenced by feedback from the reddit user [Anti-Mormon-Moroni](#).

⁶Many who decide the Church is no longer true no longer view their past tithing payments as a particularly wise use of their resources.

Dallin H. Oaks gave possible responses to a gay child asking to bring a partner home for a holiday visit. Depending on the circumstances at home, possible responses included: “Please don’t do that. Don’t put us into that position.” Or, “Yes, come, but don’t expect to stay overnight. Don’t expect

Possible loss/damange of important relationships.

Virtually all Latter-day Saints have experienced friendships that were lost or damaged when a friend or family member underwent a faith transition. In some cases, those who change faith can end up being shunned or viewed as an enemy by members who they once considered their close friends.

Similarly, a faith transition can strain existing family relationships with active members of the Church. To investigate may mean to face a loss in the closeness of some family relationships for an indeterminate length of time.

One member who had recently investigated the truth-claim data in an effort to understand why his son had left the LDS Church listed out [the kinds of losses his wife might experience](#) were she to investigate and lose her faith in LDS truth-claims. Nearly all of these emphasize a loss/damage to past and future meaning or loss/damage to important relationships:

- Her connection with her Father in Heaven she has known her whole life.
- Her connection with Jesus, the Savior of the world.
- Her connection with her 3 siblings (and their spouses) all of whom she adores.
- Her connection with her parents who are lovely amazing parents.
- Her understanding that she has been a good mother by teaching our kids the gospel as priority one.
- Her connection with all of her friends and their children.
- Her sense of self-worth through serving in callings and attending church.
- Her connection with her wonderful past (a near picture-perfect upbringing completely defined by Mormonism.)
- Her sense of identity as primarily a wife and a mother, which is God's divine design for her.
- Her sweet connection with all of her nieces and nephews.
- Her beautiful connection with the youth of the ward/stake.
- Her understanding of the heavens and the earth.
- Her promise of an eternal family and celestial reward
- The loss of her spiritual gifts as identified in her patriarchal blessing.
- The loss of going to the temple for special occasions for her, her kids, her extended family.
- ...and more.

Fear of becoming an apostate or a wolf in sheep's clothing

Members know that investigating is the first step to potentially becoming an "apostate", and apostates are generally portrayed in the Church in the worst possible

to be a lengthy house guest. Don't expect us to take you out and introduce you to our friends, or to deal with you in a public situation that would imply our approval of your 'partnership.'" ([source](#)). Someone who decided the Church was not true might regret following Elder Oak's advice in this regard.

light.⁷

A person may remain in the Church after investigation but the investigation may result in their faith becoming more nuanced. If they adopt more nuanced views in an effort to reconcile their faith with the evidence they have encountered, they may then face the potential disapproval of some orthodox members who might view them as [a wolf in sheep's clothing](#).⁸

Damage to ego

Investigating the truth-claims of the Church may require self-negation of one's own ego in these ways:

- The mere act of investigation may imply that the spiritual experiences a person had are insufficient or their faith is somehow lacking.
- If investigating were to result in a loss or damage to faith, then a person might have to admit:
 - defeat to the other-side (i.e., “anti-mormons” were right)
 - that they’d been fooled or blinded for a significant portion of their life.

Assert faithfulness, pass a trial of faith, and avoid distraction

Some members may feel like critical investigation is something to be avoided—that refusing to investigate is to pass a trial of faith. Refusing to investigate may be a way to assert a person's devotion and faithfulness to the cause. Or, a person may see refusing to investigate as a stoic choice to avoid distraction with things of lesser importance to their eternal progression.

⁷Consider the words of Joseph Smith to Isaac Behunin—frequently repeated by [leaders and manuals](#)—when Isaac suggested that if he were to leave Mormonism he would simply leave the Saints and settle down someplace else:

Brother Behunin, you don't know what you would do. No doubt these men [murderous apostates] once thought as you do. Before you joined this Church you stood on neutral ground. ... When you joined this Church you enlisted to serve God. When you did that you left the neutral ground, and you never can get back on to it. Should you forsake the Master you enlisted to serve, it will be by the instigation of the evil one, and you will follow his dictation and be his servant. ([Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith, ch. 27: Beware the Bitter Fruits of Apostasy](#))

⁸A person who believes in unorthodox viewpoints—however honestly they may have arrived at them—may be viewed by other members as [either “lazy or proud”](#), depending on the sophistication of their thinking.

Follow some counsel from General Authorities

Although some of the Brethren have encouraged investigation there are many statements by General Authorities that seem to discourage critical investigation.⁹

For instance, Sheri Dew, a former counselor in the Relief Society General Presidency taught:

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. (BYU Idaho Devotional, [Will You Engage in the Wrestle?](#))

Why investigate?

There are several compelling reasons to critically investigate the foundational truth-claims of the Church.

Most who investigate are glad they did

A pair of informal surveys were conducted in an attempt to quantify the percentage of people who were glad they had investigated the truth-claims of the Church. The results were highly consistent: *regardless of the outcome of investigation* (i.e., whether or not a person retained their testimony and/or membership in the Church) the vast majority of people who investigated the truth claims of the Church are glad they did or wish they would have investigated sooner.¹⁰

⁹The Church strongly [emphasizes use of “approved” sources](#) generally. Past leaders have advised members to avoid “faith-killers” (see, for example, Carlos Asay’s October 1981 GC talk where he tells of “an apostate” drawing away a member by showing them changes in the Church’s past. Asay advises: “Avoid those who would tear down your faith. Faith-killers are to be shunned. The seeds which they plant in the minds and hearts of men grow like cancer and eat away the Spirit.” and “Do not permit faithless people to turn you out of the right way or to put you out of existence.”).

In addition, Elder Ballard instructed CES teachers concerning their students:

Remind them that James did not say, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him Google!” Wise people do not rely on the Internet to diagnose and treat emotional, mental, and physical health challenges, especially life-threatening challenges. Instead, they seek out health experts, those trained and licensed by recognized medical and state boards. Even then, prudent people seek a second opinion. If that is the sensible course to take in finding answers for emotional, mental, and physical health issues, it is even more so when eternal life is at stake. When something has the potential to threaten our spiritual life, our most precious family relationships, and our membership in the kingdom, we should find thoughtful and faithful Church leaders to help us. [The Opportunities and Responsibilities of CES Teachers in the 21st Century](#), February 26, 2016.

¹⁰14 of 15 respondents (93%) who consider themselves a believing member of the Church and who have investigated the arguments against the Church answered “no” to the question: “Do you wish you would NOT have investigated the arguments against the Church? (question for believing members) ([source](#)). 111 of 123 respondents (90%) on the exmormon subreddit answered “Yes” to

Small relative expenditure of time and effort.

A 40 year old member of record has spent approximately 5,000 hours listening to core Church instruction. An individual who served a mission spent between roughly 6,000 and 8,000 hours knocking doors, asking people to investigate the message, and attend Church with them. Against this backdrop, the time and effort required to investigate the Church's truth claims seems relatively small.

A former member reflected:

I wouldn't even buy a nosehair trimmer from Amazon without checking a ton of negative and positive reviews, but I never even looked at 3rd party reviews of the church before investing my life into it. ([source](#))

Gain something valuable in the investigation

There is much potential for good to occur in the course of investigation—regardless of the outcome.

Opportunity for reconciliation

The process of investigation opens the door for reconciliation with former members or other members who are grappling with difficult Church issues:

- If an investigator see flaws in the logic or evidence that's been neglected then they can offer it up and perhaps convince those who have chosen a different path to come back. Perhaps those people have missed something?¹¹
- If an investigator is persuaded by the evidence (even partially), then they have gained some common ground with individuals who have experienced a faith transition.

If a person investigates and their beliefs do not change, some kinds of reconciliation may still occur:

- Merely reading through the issues is an acknowledgement of the sincerity and humanity of others who have chosen to investigate.
- A person who investigates may find themselves better able to empathize and understand those who have experienced a faith transition. They may be in a better position to then defend and advocate in the religious square for those who *have* chosen to leave.

the question: "I wish I would have learned about the data and arguments challenging the Church's truth claims sooner than I did." ([source](#)) (As of 2016-04-12). Almost all those who explained their "No" response chalked it up to timing.

¹¹Consider the story Elder Faust told of [a young man's brave rescue of his brother Pete](#).

Greater appreciation for eternal truth

If the investigation alters a person's view of the Church to some degree, then they may simultaneously gain a greater appreciation for whichever truths withstood scrutiny. All that was good and true beforehand—if it *was* truly good and true—should remain even after investigation.

In addition, members are taught in the temple that “all truth may be circumscribed into one great whole”. How can a member accomplish this circumscription without considering all truth?

May foster a climate of belief

BYU Scholars are fond of quoting Austin Farrar, a famous theologian:

Though argument does not create conviction, lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows that ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish.

While many individuals who investigate end up with less belief in LDS Church truth claims, some individuals who investigate [have commented](#) “that this additional digging and uncovering has actually made stronger [their] belief that the Mormon church is the only true church of Jesus Christ.”

A full-measure of agency

Arguably, a person who is unfamiliar with all the data and potential interpretations is constrained in their ability to make an informed choice about whether they ought to become a member or continue their membership in the Church. True agency is dependent on knowledge.

Concern and duty for loved ones

A person who feels concern for or duty towards loved-ones may feel a need to investigate in behalf of those they love.¹² For instance, a parent might reason that their children will ultimately confront the truth-claim data at some point and want to be ready with some answers and perspectives. Or a parent might want to investigate so they can fairly represent alternative interpretations in order to give their children ample opportunity to examine different belief systems and form their own beliefs.¹³

¹²The content of this point was taken from or influenced by feedback from the reddit user [Anti-Mormon-Moroni](#).

¹³Parents often subject children to many hours of religious instruction each week to influence their children to believe like they do (typically done with only the best motivation). Being aware of and also presenting alternative models can be useful to ensure children are given a genuine opportunity to develop their own beliefs. Consider the arguments presented in [grooming minds](#).

The consequences of Church membership for an individual and their family are enormous, so it seems reasonable to suggest a person responsible for others has some duty to critically investigate the truth claims to ensure they are sound.¹⁴

The search for truth is its own reward.

Exposure to additional light and knowledge—even if it causes a person to need to rework some of their initial narratives—is satisfying in its own right and a worthy endeavor.

Joseph Smith taught:

One of the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism is to receive truth, let it come from whence it may. ([source](#))

And Hugh B. Brown taught:

Only error needs to fear freedom of expression. Seek truth in all fields...
(1958 BYU, Hugh B. Brown, [Man and What He May Become](#))

Generally, understanding more truth will allow a person to produce a more accurate internal map of reality, and a more accurate internal map of reality will allow them to more adeptly change what is possible to change and to peacefully accept what cannot be changed.

¹⁴The opening paragraph of “The Ethics of Belief: The Duty of Inquiry” begins with this analogy:

A shipowner was about to send to sea an emigrant-ship. He knew that she was old, and not overwell built at the first; that she had seen many seas and climes, and often had needed repairs. Doubts had been suggested to him that possibly she was not seaworthy. These doubts preyed upon his mind, and made him unhappy; he thought that perhaps he ought to have her thoroughly overhauled and refitted, even though this should put him to great expense. Before the ship sailed, however, he succeeded in overcoming these melancholy reflections. He said to himself that she had gone safely through so many voyages and weathered so many storms that it was idle to suppose she would not come safely home from this trip also. He would put his trust in Providence, which could hardly fail to protect all these unhappy families that were leaving their fatherland to seek for better times elsewhere. He would dismiss from his mind all ungenerous suspicions about the honesty of builders and contractors. In such ways he acquired a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy; he watched her departure with a light heart, and benevolent wishes for the success of the exiles in their strange new home that was to be...[and] she went down in mid-ocean and told no tales.

Consider:

- Was the shipowner guilty of the deaths of those people?
- Did the shipowner have a duty to inspect the ship when others had given him cause for concern?
- Had he inspected the boat and found it to be sound, would his inspection have been faith-destroying or faith-building?
- Had he inspected the boat and then discovered that the boat was unsound and needed repair or replacement, should he be labeled a “faith-killer”?

No more fear of the unknown.

Once a member has fully investigated the Church's truth claims (from both critical and apologetic perspectives) they cannot be surprised—they no longer need fear what a former member might say. Perhaps some individuals imagine more difficulties with the truth claims than actually exist?

Eleanor Roosevelt once stated:

You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face.

And the Mormon Newsroom explained:

It feels uncomfortable to listen to critics call our cherished beliefs into question, and yet we show strength by engaging in sincere conversations with those who oppose our views. After all, we trust that “truth will cut its own way” and love will eventually win out in the contest of ideals. (source)

General Authorities have encouraged investigation

Elder M. Russell Ballard taught CES instructors:

... please, before you send them [your students] into the world, inoculate [them] by providing faithful, thoughtful, and accurate interpretation of gospel doctrine, the scriptures, our history, and those topics that are sometimes misunderstood... I'm talking about polygamy, seer stones, different accounts of the First Vision, the process of translation of the Book of Mormon or the Book of Abraham, gender issues, race and the priesthood, or a Heavenly Mother. ... It is important that you know the content in these essays [the Gospel Topics essays on lds.org] like you know the back of your hand. ([The Opportunities and Responsibilities of CES Teachers in the 21st Century](#), February 26, 2016.)

Conclusions

The decision to critically investigate the truth claims of the Church carries with it significant consequences, and each person must weigh for themselves the relative merit of each of the reasons for and against. Hopefully this breakdown has provided some light on the considerations involved in deciding to investigate.

Given the complexity of such a determination, it seems wise to refrain from harshly judging others who have or have not engaged in such an investigation. There are a number of relevant considerations, and the decision for any given person will likely be

influenced by a variety of factors related to their personality, past experiences, and life goals.