

Testimony, spiritual experiences, and truth: A careful examination

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(note: This article is an updated version of my original [Rational Faiths](#) article)

1 Introduction

1.1 Know the truth of all things

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that the Holy Ghost is central to understanding truth. Consider these verses of scripture:

- And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things. ([Moroni 10:5](#))
- But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you. ([John 14:26](#))
- [The Holy Ghost] will show unto you all things what ye should do. ([2Ne 32:5](#))

Members are taught to “trust [not] in the arm of flesh” (D&C 1:19) but to “trust in the Lord with all [their] heart; and lean not unto [their] own understanding.” (Proverbs 3:5).¹ Knowledge gained by the Holy Ghost is considered the foundation of a testimony, which is a “personal witness borne to our souls by the Holy Ghost that certain facts of eternal significance are true and that we know them to be true.” ([Oaks, April 2008 Conference](#)) Members are sometimes given the impression that these spiritual experiences may be trusted absolutely:

When we know spiritual truths by spiritual means, we can be just as sure of that knowledge as scholars and scientists are of the different kinds of knowledge they have acquired by different methods. ([Oaks, April 2008 Conference](#))

1.2 The Church is cautious with spiritual impressions

Those who have been in the Church for some time, however, will find evidence supporting the notion that the body and leadership of the Church is cautious in how it deals with interpreting the thoughts and feelings associated with the Holy Ghost. While virtually any positive emotion or thought may be taken as confirmation of the core truths of the Gospel, when dealing with difficult

¹This is not to suggest that Latter-day Saints do not apply their intellect to most aspects of their lives: “by study and also by faith” is repeated three times in the Doctrine & Covenants (88:118, 109:7, and 109:14). Hence, LDS tradition rarely abandons reason to faith and mostly seeks to reconcile the rational and spiritual insofar as that is possible. Many members are highly educated and make significant contributions across the spectrum of secular studies. However, when applied to the Church or spiritual phenomena themselves, “study” is typically used to bolster—rather than to critically examine—core truth-claims.

decisions or areas where there are conflicting doctrines, scriptures, or ideals, experienced Latter-day Saints tend to be cautious.

For instance, it is well-known that decisions of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve are only made in unanimity (see [D&C 107:27,29](#)). Were the feelings of the Spirit trusted absolutely, then we might expect to see decisions made based on the spiritual confirmation given even one member of the quorum.²

Members are taught to be distrustful of spiritual confirmations that fall outside of their Church stewardship.³ Not only does this include callings, but it also includes confirmations received about life decisions such as marriage—most members know the story of the returned missionary who receives a witness of who he is supposed to marry, and these are regarded with due skepticism.

Latter-day Saints are similarly disinclined to believe the accuracy of any spiritual promptings that promote ideas that are contrary to the accepted doctrines and practices of the Church.⁴

Nowhere is the caution related to interpreting spiritual feelings more evident than in the Preach My Gospel Manual. In the section “How Do I Recognize and Understand the Spirit?”, a “goodness” test is outlined which is meant to enable Church members to check the veracity of spiritual promptings.⁵ An external

²Were spiritual promptings fully trusted one might imagine this kind of conversation: “The Spirit confirmed this to me, hence I know it is correct and we can move forward.”

³Dallin H. Oaks taught:

... when one person purports to receive revelation for another person outside his or her own area of responsibility—such as a Church member who claims to have revelation to guide the entire Church or a person who claims to have a revelation to guide another person over whom he or she has no presiding authority according to the order of the Church—you can be sure that such revelations are not from the Lord. (Gospel Doctrine Teacher’s Manual [Lesson 6: “I Will Tell You in Your Mind and in Your Heart, by the Holy Ghost”](#))

⁴A First Presidency Statement from 1912 canonized *a priori* rejection of spiritual communication not in harmony with accepted Church doctrine:

When ... inspiration conveys something out of harmony with the accepted revelations of the Church or contrary to the decisions of its constituted authorities, Latter-day Saints may know that it is not of God, no matter how plausible it may appear. (Gospel Doctrine Teacher’s Manual [Lesson 6: “I Will Tell You in Your Mind and in Your Heart, by the Holy Ghost”](#))

This idea holds in practice. Brent Larsen recorded his excommunication appeal, which entailed a conversation with a General Authority. When Larsen insisted that he is “supposed to follow the Holy Ghost”, the Seventy responded:

Nobody asked you to surrender blind obedience, okay? But without a prophet we would be—you want to have the women in here that believe they hold the priesthood, so they’re gonna say it just like you. They’re gonna talk just like you... So you’re gonna tell me they’re all three right because they’re all gonna testify that that holy ghost that told you to do it that way is the same holy ghost that tell them to do it that way... ([source](#))

⁵The test to determine if a spiritual impression is to be trusted: “Does it persuade one to do good, to rise, to stand tall, to do the right thing, to be kind, to be generous? Then it is of

test seems unnecessary if we could easily and always rely on spiritual feelings to lead us to truth.

Perhaps the clearest teaching on why we should be cautious interpreting spiritual promptings (also included in *Preach My Gospel*) is from Dallin H. Oaks, who warns:

We should study things out in our minds, using the reasoning powers our Creator has placed within us. Then we should pray for guidance and act upon it if we receive it. If we do not receive guidance, we should act upon our best judgment. Persons who persist in seeking revelatory guidance on subjects on which the Lord has not chosen to direct us **may concoct an answer out of their own fantasy or bias, or they may even receive an answer through the medium of false revelation.** [emphasis added] ([source](#))

Why are skepticism, external tests, and controls needed when using spiritual feelings to determine truth? What might cause Oaks to conclude that a persistent supplicant may receive what they thought was a spiritual impression, only for it to have been self-concocted or just turn out to be a false revelation?

2 Do spiritual impressions teach truth?

2.1 Not unique to the Church

The process by which members confirm their beliefs is not unique to the LDS church, but is used effectively by many religious (or quasi-religious) groups to substantiate their truth claims. The following three examples [from this video](#) demonstrate:

Marshall Applewhite, former leader of [Heaven's Gate](#), said this about testing the group's truth claims:

... At least ponder this, that you go into the privacy of your closet. Don't ask your neighbors, your friends what they think of this. You go see if you can connect with the purest, highest source, that you might consider God and say, "What about this? Is it for real?" (~11:19)

A.J. Miller, leader of the [Divine Truth movement](#), encourages his followers to determine truth in this manner:

... There is a general process that God designed that allows us to discover what is truth and what is not... the process would be: ask this God to receive love and then feel about that particular thing and if that particular thing turns off the flow I know it's not true

the Spirit of God." ([Preach My Gospel](#))

... And if that particular thing stays flowing I then, I know it's true.
(~8:34)

Many splinter LDS groups, such as [the Apostolic United Brethren](#), ask members to confirm their belief using Moroni's promise in the Book of Mormon. When members of such groups bear testimony, they sound virtually identical to the testimonies borne by Latter-day Saints:

I've been searching for a witness of this work and of this church, and since tonight I got my witness and it's burning within my soul of how important this work is and how true it is. I know it is. And it's hard to believe that just a year ago I was in High School, and now I'm in a plural marriage and [audible sigh] struggling. But I know without a shadow of a doubt that this is the Lord's work—that I have finally found it. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.⁶ (~5:11)

Similar experiences are reported by those who have read the sealed portion of the Book of Mormon, as received by Christopher Nemelka:

Ida Smith nevertheless had an intense, life-changing reaction when she read the book [the sealed portion revealed by Nemelka]. She devoured it over six weeks, in the process emptying two boxes of tissues and several red ballpoint pens as she wept and underlined page after page of scripture. ([source](#))

2.2 Confirmation of contradictory positions

Latter-day Saints believe that the Holy Ghost and/or the Light of Christ can lead *anyone* to truth. Is the Holy Ghost or Light of Christ merely leading those people to some *aspect* of the truth, or do these spiritual experiences confirm irreconcilable positions?

2.2.1 Contradictory truth claims

The various religious groups mentioned in the above section (Heaven's Gate, Divine Truth, etc.) appear to have been experiencing confirmation of teachings which are very difficult to reconcile with standard LDS truth claims. Latter-day Saints would be inclined to reject out-of-hand that: suicide is the means to liaison with an advanced UFO civilization⁷, A. J. Miller is the reincarnated Jesus of Nazareth⁸, polygamy should currently be practiced, or that Hyrum Smith

⁶This was the testimony of a young plural wife, recorded in 1996, at a sacrament meeting of the The True and Living Church of Jesus Christ and Saints of the Last Days.

⁷Applewhite led his entire UFO cult to commit mass suicide to lead them to what they considered the next plane of existence.

⁸A. J. Miller is genuinely convinced that [he is the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth](#).

was reincarnated in the person of Christopher Nemelka⁹ and he was able to spiritually translate the sealed portion of the Book of Mormon.

2.2.2 Witnesses of divergent belief systems

Polls of members across religious faiths suggest that many people experience strong confirmatory answers to the question of whether theirs is the most correct religion ([source](#)). Of the respondents who believe that God answers prayer, most are ‘very sure’ of their answer. The answers include verbiage familiar to Latter-day Saints:

- “An overwhelming wave of calmness and peace” (Catholic)
- “indescribable; being too intense for description.” (JW)
- “audible voice and dream+apparition” (Catholic)
- “. . . felt as if my heart had stopped and then ‘felt’ as if a voice inside spoke to me, telling me I was loved as a child and to be true to his church - I was near a Catholic Church at that time.”
- “I felt God’s presence & had a knowledge of Him” (Catholic)
- “I prayed and asked if the orthodox spiritual path was to be my path and a voice, a voice I cannot describe, said ‘For this reason you were made.’” (Orthodox Christian)
- “inner voice” (Catholic)
- “it was a firm answer. like seeing a brick fireplace still standing after the house burns down around it.” (Judaism)
- “ask [sic] to see something and it appeared” (Islam)
- “God puts a feeling of peace in my heart that I can’t describe. No money can buy such happiness.” (Islam)
- “I asked if I should do something, then the next day circumstances prevented me from doing anything else” (Judaism)
- “Gave me a prayer language when I asked; used me to heal a friend with seizures” (Christian charismatic)
- “too wonderful to put into words” (Catholic)
- “I was inspired to look randomly in the Bible and the text answer my question.” (7th-day Adventist)
- “I asked which religion to follow and He clearly said Scientology. I was Baptist until He led me into the light.” (Scientology)
- “Just a deep sense of certainty.” (Quaker)

Audio/video recordings of other adherents [sharing their spiritual witnesses](#) suggests that these individuals are highly sincere. Here again, a close examination of the beliefs adopted by these individuals as a result of their witnesses calls into question the reconcilability of these belief systems.

⁹Christopher Nemelka claims to be the reincarnated Hyrum Smith.

2.2.3 God's will on gay marriage

Another poll asked people to pray to ascertain God's will on the subject of gay marriage. Of the 68% of the participants who believed that they were able to assess the will of God, *every single person* found that God agreed with their prior stance on same sex marriage—even though the stances were evenly divided and diametrically opposed among the collection of participants ([source](#)).

2.3 Confirmation of falsehoods

Within the LDS tradition, spiritual impressions have also been associated with stories that were later found to be embellished or out-right fabricated. In “[Examining Church Claims](#)”, Donald Cohen explains:

Another useful example [of spiritual impressions confirming false teachings] involves the various talks, speeches, and books by Paul H. Dunn, a well known General Authority, and a member of The First Quorum of the Seventy, from 1976 to 1989. His talks drew upon various events in his life, and thousands upon thousands of members testified of how they felt the Spirit testifying to them when hearing or reading his words, strengthening their testimonies of the Church. It turned out that many of the facts and events he spoke and wrote about were either completely false, or substantially embellished. He eventually acknowledged this publicly, and he was given ‘Emeritus’ status in his Church calling as a result.

Substantial evidence suggests that spiritual experiences and approaches similar to those reported by LDS members support truth claims that are contradictory and/or that are not factually accurate.

If contradictory truth claims or fabricated stories may be confirmed by spiritual feelings, then it begs a closer examination of a spiritual experience.

3 What's behind a spiritual experience?

Although many members avoid thinking in such terms, the idea that spiritual experiences are mediated through biological/physical phenomena is right at home in LDS thought. For instance, Joseph Smith himself taught that there is no such thing as immaterial matter, and the connection between the body and spirit is strongly emphasized in teachings such as the Word of Wisdom—where promised blessings to a health code include “wisdom and great treasures of knowledge.”

The iconic spiritual experience for a Latter-day Saint is one that involves both the heart and the mind, as described in a revelation to Joseph Smith:

Yea, behold, I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart. (D&C 8:2)

3.1 The emotion of elevation

The *feeling* most LDS members refer to as the feeling of the Spirit in the heart (or burning in the bosom) is probably [the emotion of elevation](#). Elevation:

- occurs as a response to witnessing moral beauty
- “generates a desire to help or associate with others”
- generates a desire to cultivate oneself to become a better person
- is distinct from the feelings associated with amusement or happiness (which tend to promote self-serving behaviors)
- causes feelings of “warmth or tingling” in a person’s chest
- can be predictably generated in a laboratory setting
- is mediated hormonally¹⁰ (at least in part)

For those practiced in feeling the Spirit, the above description seems like a perfect fit. Certain details even have explanatory power. For instance, D&C 8:2 talks of an initial experience of mind and heart, but that the Holy Ghost will then “dwell in your heart”. Such a description matches up with a feeling that is hormonally mediated and lingers beyond the initial trigger event.

Furthermore, the idea that witnessing moral beauty generates this emotion provides an interesting connection between the Moroni 10:3 and the rest of Moroni’s promise. [Moroni 10:3](#) states:

¹⁰The emotion of elevation increases oxytocin levels in nursing mothers ([source](#)). We expect one or more hormones to be involved in elevation given the dizzying array of hormones that are known to influence our emotional and mental state. For instance, here is a list of the hormones known to be involved in how we deal with conflict ([source](#)): Adrenalin triggers the fight or flight response; Testosterone stimulates aggression; Oxytocin instills trust, increases loyalty, and promotes the “tend and befriend” response; Estrogen triggers the release of oxytocin; Endorphins reinforce collaborative experiences with pleasure; Dopamine generates a reward response and fortifies addiction; Serotonin regulates moods; Phenylethylamine induces excitement and anticipation; Vasopressin encourages bonding in males in a variety of species.

The way in which these hormones play out among animals to influence “fight or flight” or “aggression vs. cooperation” may be relevant to spiritual experiences ([source](#)):

These aggressive behavioral patterns and the modulation of an animal’s tendency to fight or flee are controlled by a hierarchical system of neural structures. Many of these are found in the limbic system; a part of the forebrain that is involved in emotionally based behavior and motivation. These neural structures interact with biochemicals that are produced inside and outside the nervous system.

For example, it has been shown that serotonin injections cause lobsters and other animals to take a dominant or aggressive posture, while octopamine injections induce submissive postures, which favor cooperation. When serotonin levels are increased in subordinate animals, their willingness to fight also increases, and declines as they are reduced.

Behold, I would exhort you that when ye shall read these things . . .
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.

Pondering on the mercy of God across the history of mankind is likely to tap into this emotion such that when the question of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon is broached, the precondition for experiencing elevation has already been met. Counter-examples also seem consistent: those who fixate on the vengeful God of the Book of Mormon (e.g., destruction at his coming) seem less able to experience the Spirit when reading the book.

Similarly, patrons to LDS temples often report experiencing the feelings of the Spirit. Given that temple work consists of the performance of highly altruistic acts of service for the dead within places of exquisite beauty, we would expect the emotion of elevation to be abundantly experienced. And the counter-example also holds: those troubled by various aspects of the temple seem not to feel the Spirit like those who are not bothered by the same concerns.

It is well-known that acts of service induce the feelings of the Spirit, and this matches up well with the causes and feelings related to elevation. LDS for-profit subsidiaries also claim to be able to predictably generate this kind of feeling for a given product.¹¹

3.2 Inner speech, inner experience, and/or self-realization

A spiritual experience, in LDS thought, is also accompanied by the flow of “pure intelligence” [as taught by Joseph Smith](#). The exact mapping onto psychology and brain physiology is unclear, but it likely involves some combination of these:

1. [Inner speech](#)
2. [Inner Experience](#) (semi-inarticulated thought)

¹¹Is “the Spirit” a marketable product? Here’s how Bonneville Communications, a for-profit subsidiary of the LDS Church, described their product, ‘HeartSell’:

At Bonneville Communications, our ability to touch the hearts and minds of audiences makes us an essential resource for organizations with vital messages. . . . Our unique strength is the ability to touch the hearts and minds of our audiences, evoking first feeling, then thought and, finally, action. We call this uniquely powerful brand of creative ‘HeartSell’ - strategic emotional advertising that stimulates response. ([source](#) [from April 2014])

Long after people forget what they hear, they remember how they feel. So Bonneville creates those unforgettable feelings for those who request our support. Bonneville’s work has been internationally recognized for its ability to inspire and motivate. (2007 [source](#) has been [blocked by robots.txt](#), but [multiple sources attest to its validity](#))

Of course, Bonneville isn’t the only company involved in marketing that understands the importance of generating powerful emotional responses to sell a product. However, since these kinds of emotions can be predictably generated for a given product, it again suggests caution in interpreting such an experience as a divine confirmation of “truth”.

3. Self-realization

Whether fully articulated or not, our mental, internal dialog and sense of connection with the rest of the cosmos likely under-girds the mental component of a spiritual experience.

3.2.1 Self-generation

The flow of “pure intelligence” may indeed represent communication from/with a higher power. However, as Dallin H. Oaks pointed out before, such thoughts may also be “[concocted] out of [one’s] own fantasy or bias”. Distinct phenomena point to our ability to generate profound and complex ideas—without even being aware that we are the responsible party.

For instance, incredible feats of authorship have been performed in [automatic writing](#), and the technique itself can be [learned](#). Inspection of fantastic examples (e.g., Helene Smith) have shown that the content was “derived largely from forgotten sources (for example, books read as a child).”

The communication facilitators of severely handicapped students depicted in the Frontline documentary “[Prisoners of Silence](#)” are likely responsible for generating volumes of content without being aware that they were the generators.

3.2.2 The power of suggestion

The power of suggestion may also play a role in the mechanics behind spiritual experience. For instance, in attempting to replicate the effects of the [Koren helmet](#) (aka “God helmet”), a device thought to induce spiritual experience through magnetic fields, it was discovered that the non-verbal suggestion of spiritual experience induced just as many reports of spiritual experience from those whose helmets were turned off as those with them turned on. ([source](#))

[Kumare](#) is a powerful documentary that shows that acting spiritual can produce spiritual experience in others. A man adopts a fake Indian accent, dresses like a guru and adopts that persona. Even though he is “faking it” to some extent (his teachings do evolve somewhat until they seem heartfelt), he is very successful in gathering followers who treat him as a spiritual guide and lead them through spiritual experiences. He eventually “comes out” as his normal, American self, but even after coming out, some of his followers insist that he has psychic abilities—even though he flatly denies it.

4 Testimony, bias, and propaganda

LDS belief is confirmed by spiritual experiences, but members will often argue that their testimony/knowledge goes deeper than that—they “just know”. What

kinds of mechanisms might underlie a belief that the holder is unable to source, articulate, or explain? Could members be biased but unaware of this bias?

4.1 Insufficient justification

It has been shown¹² that when we try to convince someone else of something that we don't fully believe, it will alter our original beliefs to correspond with our words. The Church encourages its members to begin declarations with the phrase "I know" At least in part, then, some of what a member "knows" may merely be their mind working to align their beliefs with their declarations.¹³

4.2 Too wide a net?

Members are taught that virtually any positive feeling is the Spirit confirming the truth of the gospel (see "[How do I Recognize and Understand the Spirit](#)" from Preach My Gospel). The New Era teaches that the "thoughts and feelings from the Holy Ghost can come" ([source](#)):

- "Immediately and intensely."
- "Subtly and gradually."
- "So delicately that [a person] may not even consciously recognize it."

An unsuspecting individual may find that any number of positive emotions and/or mental states are "confirmation" of the Gospel, even if this range of emotions and mental states is shared by those from other faiths and even though these emotions and states are experienced by those with no belief in God at all ([example](#)).

¹²From the 1959 study on insufficient justification: "If a person is induced to do or say something which is contrary to his private opinion, there will be a tendency for him to change his opinion so as to bring it into correspondence with what he has done or said." ([video which details the experiment](#) and more on [insufficient justification](#))

¹³The teaching that we should speak with greater certainty than we feel in order to gain greater certainty is illustrated:

Oh, if I could teach you this one principle. A testimony is to be found in the bearing of it! . . . Can you not see that it will be supplied as you share it? (Boyd K. Packer, [Ensign Jan 1983](#))

Another way to seek a testimony seems astonishing when compared with the methods of obtaining other knowledge. We gain or strengthen a testimony by bearing it. Someone even suggested that some testimonies are better gained on the feet bearing them than on the knees praying for them. (Dallin H. Oaks, [April 2008 Conference](#))

This kind of approach is useful for internalizing desired attributes (e.g., [positive thinking](#)) but the validity of factual "truths" obtained in such a manner remains in question.

4.2.1 Confirmation bias

We tend to ignore all the times we have a feeling or notion and nothing came of it, and over-emphasize any time a feeling or notion led to something good.¹⁴

For instance, if a person were praying to a wooden idol in their room, would they be able to distinguish answers to prayer from that idol versus answers from God? They pray for something and it happens: “the idol answered my prayer”. They pray for something and it doesn’t happen, “I need to wait for the answer”. They pray for something and it happens counter to their expectations: “The idol knows best what I needed, or I must have been praying for the wrong thing.”¹⁵ We cannot distinguish between the success rate of prayers to God and those offered up to an idol, suggesting that we should be cautious in interpreting answers to prayer as confirmation of our current belief system. (adapted from this [source](#))

4.2.1.1 Keep praying

The same kind of confirmation bias may be at play with investigators praying to receive a testimony of the Book of Mormon. An investigator who may not have received an answer is told to just “keep praying”¹⁶ until they do. An investigator that receives confirmation of a decision to *not* join the church will likely be told that they weren’t in tune or that this feeling should be doubted. But, if nothing but a positive confirmation of something is an acceptable outcome, then it should raise questions about the validity of information gained in that manner.

4.2.1.2 Doubts vs. Questions

Recent Ensign articles ask members to deal with doubts about the Church in a problematic way. For instance, members are told that questions are okay while doubts are not (where a doubt is a question that actually challenges the truth claims of the Church) (“When doubts and questions arise”, [Ensign March 2015](#)). The various strategies for dealing with questions have one thing in common: they prevent a member from ever arriving at the conclusion that the Church may be wrong. Although these are effective strategies for maintaining faith, were they applied to members of other faith traditions (e.g. to investigators of the Church

¹⁴It is easy to see biases in those with other beliefs but difficult to see our own biases (see the video “[Sacred Bias](#)” for several examples and discussion). See “[Reality Schmeality](#)” for additional relevant biases.

¹⁵A good example of this kind of rationalization is from [Wrong Roads](#) a Mormon Message by Jeffrey R. Holland where he and his son pray and both feel that they should take a particular road. The road turns out to be a dead-end! Holland’s son questions him about this, but Elder Holland is able to easily rationalize the answer: going the wrong way helped them to *more quickly* find the right road and have *more confidence* it was the right way out. The problem with this kind of thinking is that it does not allow for an answer to ever be wrong, so the veracity of all answers interpreted in this light becomes suspect.

¹⁶Examples of the counsel to “keep praying” until you receive a testimony abound. See, for example, Elder Staheli’s October 2004 address “[Securing Our Testimonies](#)”.

who already belonged to a different faith tradition), then it would promote the maintenance of any prior faith position—regardless of its truth (see [“Fix your faith crisis with this one weird trick!”](#) for more discussion).

4.3 The power of propaganda

Bearing testimony is an integral part of LDS services, classroom study, and missionary efforts, and a typical member will either listen to or bear testimony many hundreds or thousands of times a year. Preach My Gospel outlines [successful approaches to bearing testimony](#) that are used by members and missionaries alike.

At least in part, a testimony impacts the hearer because it follows many patterns of effective propaganda, including (see [wikipedia:“Propaganda techniques”](#)):

- oversimplification (testimonies are supposed to be simple, direct declarations)
- repetition (missionaries and members counseled to bear testimony often)
- loaded language (language with strong emotional implications is used, e.g. “know” rather than believe)
- virtue words (e.g. “true”, “joy”)
- managing the news (“confine itself to a few points and repeat them over and over”)
- obfuscation, intentional vagueness, confusion (what does “know” even mean?)
- thought-terminating cliché (e.g., “doubt your doubts”)
- transfer (e.g., association with family—families can be forever)
- unstated assumptions (how a person “knows” each aspect in a testimony is typically left unsaid)

Because it follows good propaganda technique, testimony is powerful at persuading others; however, that power comes at some cost to truth itself—details and nuance are necessary to accurately represent reality.¹⁷

4.4 Repetition, repetition, repetition

Latter-day Saints are exposed to Church teachings on a consistent, frequent basis. Three hours of Sunday meetings (which are mostly composed of lessons and talks), firesides and devotionals, daily family and individual scripture study, family home evening, mutual activities, and school-day seminary/institute instruction mean that an active member is exposed to LDS teachings on a continual basis. Such a program is useful for encouraging the internalization of LDS teachings,

¹⁷For instance, one could bear testimony that the Book of Abraham is “true”, but for such a testimony to be accurate it would require numerous caveats and a detailed explanation à la [“Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham”](#) at lds.org.

and repetition is a useful tool when trying to learn anything new. But, such repetition can also explain some of the positive feelings associated with Church activity and how a member can “just know.”

In what is known as the “[illusory truth effect](#)”, experiments have shown that as we are repeatedly exposed to information, regardless of its truth, we are more inclined to believe it.

Similarly, we experience what psychologists refer to as a “warm glow” as we are exposed to the familiar in what is termed the “[mere-exposure effect](#)”.¹⁸

4.5 The effect of new information

LDS truth claims have come under intense scrutiny with advent of the internet age. How are we prone to react when exposed to new information related to LDS history and truth claims?

We tend to be conservative in updating our old beliefs, giving too much preference to older information (“[conservatism bias](#)”).

When people are provided evidence against their beliefs, they will often reject the evidence and become more firmly entrenched in their belief system in a phenomenon termed the “backfire effect.” (see [wikipedia:Confirmation_bias](#) and [this article](#))

5 Circularities: pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps?

When examining or explaining the workings of the spirit, several interesting circular arguments emerge. Circularity does not necessarily indicate that either the premise or conclusion is incorrect,¹⁹ but becoming aware of the circularity is helpful in avoiding logical fallacies and hollow arguments. Circularities may point to a lack of evidence in areas where a genuine argument was once thought to exist.

5.1 Circularity in pray-feel

Perhaps the ultimate factor in deciding whether or not we can rely on the feelings of the Holy Ghost for truth involves whether or not feelings and/or thoughts

¹⁸The “warm glow of familiarity” is thought to be a heuristic cue to safety. Interestingly, the positive feelings derived from exposure to the familiar are felt more strongly when our mood is negative.[\(source\)](#).

¹⁹For example, the scientific method cannot be proven “true” by the scientific method (even if there are other reasons to believe in its validity).

are used by the Holy Ghost to transmit truth. The pray-feel process is suspect because this all-critical question cannot be answered using the method itself. Consider:

If one were to pray and ask God, “Are the good feelings I get when I pray about the truthfulness of something from God (or are they self-induced)?” *what would a good feeling tell me?*

5.2 Pray-feel and the Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon teaches that it is through the Holy Ghost that we can know the truth of all things ([Moroni 10:4-5](#)). Cohen explains the problem with this teaching:

The most obvious question [in Moroni 4:5], which often doesn’t get asked, is how do we know that this method of identifying truth is even valid and/or reliable in the first place? In order for this statement to be ‘true’, the book itself has to be demonstrated to be ‘true’. And how does one establish the book to be true? - by applying the method prescribed in the book. This is a clearcut example of circular reasoning: “A is true because B is true; B is true because A is true.” ([Cohen “Examining Church Claims”](#))

5.3 Is it good?

As mentioned above, the Preach My Gospel manual presents a test for deciding whether a prompting was from genuinely from the Spirit (“Does it persuade one to do good, to rise, to stand tall, to do the right thing, to be kind, to be generous? Then it is of the Spirit of God.”) ([source](#)).

There are several potential problems with this test, depending on how strictly the test is interpreted:

- If a seeker is deciding between decisions that are *all* considered good, then the test is not helpful in distinguishing between feelings.
- If a seeker is trying to decide whether something is good or not, then the test may not be helpful since one is not clear about what is good in the first place.
- When ideas contradict someone’s world-view those ideas often make them feel uncomfortable. A seeker may reject truth mistakenly because they do not feel good and kind in their state of discomfort.²⁰

²⁰Consider a young adult raised in the FLDS community and continuously taught that polygamy (“celestial marriage”) was good and holy (for example, [listen to Warren Jeffs and his Uncle teach 5th to 10th grade girls](#)). Imagine that they pray and feel a spiritual prompting that polygamy is wrong—using Hinckley’s test to determine if this was really the Holy Ghost, they would be inclined to dismiss such a prompting because they *know* that polygamy is

5.4 Confirmation by authority

In a case of conflicting spiritual impressions, the feeling of the person higher in authority is given greater weight. This method effectively resolves most conflicts within the existing Church structure. However, when the question at hand is *who has the higher authority*, such as during the [succession crisis](#) after Joseph Smith's death, then this approach is ineffective.

The appeal to higher authority also fails in the case where a person is seeking to know which of the many LDS factions they should join. For instance, a spiritual confirmation to join the [FLDS church](#) is sure to be rejected as spurious by the leaders of the LDS Church and the [Apostolic United Brethren](#) (AUB). (articulated by Dennis Potter in his [blog post](#) and [paper](#))

6 Conclusions

6.1 Summary

The Church itself acknowledges that spiritual feelings may be self-concocted, and it tends to be cautious with any spiritual impressions on matters falling outside of its core teachings. Members of religions with contradictory truth-claims seem to receive spiritual witnesses that are identical to those described by Latter-day Saints. Members seem to have felt spiritual feelings confirming stories that were later determined to have been fabricated.

A spiritual experience appears to be composed of the emotion of elevation (feeling of peace and expansive “warmth” in the chest) and some combination of the various types of inner thought. Several phenomena strongly suggest that complex and profound thoughts may be auto-generated without the subject being aware that they are the ones generating them. In addition, the power of suggestion has been scientifically documented to produce spiritual experiences in many subjects.

A member's belief often runs deeper than their spiritual experiences, and several well-documented phenomena may help to explain this confidence. When individuals try to convince someone of something they do not fully believe, they tend to internalize that belief. Any number of experiences may be interpreted as confirmation of a member's beliefs, but confirmation bias may be playing a significant role. A member bears and hears countless testimonies each year, and testimonies effectively use many tools of propaganda to persuade. The repetition of church teachings makes members more prone to believe them and they will enjoy the “warm glow” of familiarity. In addition, when confronted with contrary evidence, members (like all people) are prone to becoming more

“good”, hence the prompting must have been self-concocted or false and they should dismiss it. Or, consider how a person would feel when praying about “magic” toys [if they were raised to believe magic toys were evil?](#)

deeply entrenched in their beliefs and tend to underestimate how much their internal model might need to change to reflect new information.

Several LDS modes of determining truth are likely circular, at least in part. It is impossible to verify through the pray-feel method whether our feelings are from God or ourselves. The Book of Mormon asks that readers verify it using the pray-feel method, but the pray-feel method relies on the Book of Mormon being true for validation—a circular argument. Finally, both the “goodness” test offered in Preach My Gospel and the LDS appeal to authority test are ineffective under multiple conditions, calling into question their ultimate utility.

Taken together, this analysis suggests that using spiritual feelings and an internal sense of assurance to determine truth are both problematic.

6.2 Reconciliation

Although this examination suggests that we should apply due skepticism to spiritual experiences, it does not rule out the possibility that God speaks to us through our mind and heart.

A believing Latter-day Saint may also take heart in the knowledge that their testimony is buttressed by a belief in external events, particularly miracles (e.g., Christ’s resurrection) and personal visitations (several prophets and apostles, not to mention Church members, claim to have spoken with God or Christ face to face²¹)—members do not rely on the interpretation of personal spiritual experiences alone to confirm their faith (see, for instance, [Moroni 7:25](#)).

Skepticism of spiritual experiences may be helpful for many believing Latter-day Saints—healthy skepticism of spiritual experiences can help members avoid scrupulously following every intrusive thought,²² be open to continuing revelation and direction,²³ and may help them to properly contextualize the spiritual experiences of others. In addition, these principles may offer a person wrapped up in the next “spiritual” fad good reason to question the validity of underlying assumptions and truth-claims.

²¹The objective reality of visitations by heavenly messengers should be interpreted in light of current research about the influence of DMT (N,N-Dimethyltryptamine) on human subjects. DMT is a substance which is produced endogenously and, in high enough doses, can generate the impression a person has encountered angelic entities ([source](#)).

²²For example, this former member discusses how they responded to “promptings” (comment from [source](#)):

For the longest time I thought my intrusive thoughts were the Holy Ghost, so I would do weird stuff like get out of bed a couple of times a night to make sure there were no burglars in our driveway and take different ways home. I wanted to be like the people in testimony meeting who avoided some kind of unknown tragedy because they followed bizarre spiritual promptings.

²³If spiritual experiences (especially revelation) are mediated through imperfect men, feelings, and thought patterns, then additional revelation may be useful in helping to clarify and correct past revelation.

Regardless of their ultimate source, spiritual experiences (i.e., mediated through the emotion of elevation) are important for encouraging self-improvement and helping us to look outside ourselves and to help others. The deep internal reflection and conversation associated with a spiritual experience—facilitated through prayer and meditation—can be important for clarifying our thinking and helping us to discover and articulate important truths. Given their usefulness, both the emotion of elevation and the deep, internal dialog inherent to spiritual experience ought to be sought after and cultivated.

Further, research into decision making suggests that some kinds of decisions are best made using our intuition. Malcolm Gladwell, after studying the decision making process, concluded:

We need to respect the fact that it is possible to know without knowing why we know and accept that—sometimes—we’re better off that way. (from “Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking”)

At the same time, there are compelling reasons to question the reliability of spiritual experiences and the things that we “just know”. The presented evidence suggests that the feelings associated with a spiritual experience are more suited to pointing us to what is “good” rather than what is necessarily factually true.

We must also be careful not to miss truth over a preoccupation with feelings: that which we *already* consider to be “good” is most likely to be confirmed by spiritual impression—since it will generate feelings of security and not discomfort.²⁴ Hence,

²⁴At the “[Swedish Rescue](#)”, Church leaders Marlin Jensen (MJ) and Richard Turley (RT) discuss how one’s preconceptions (i.e., culture) strongly influence whether or not a person experiences the feelings of the Holy Ghost:

Question: Why do we have such a bad feeling when we come to the temple? If the Holy Ghost was there this would give a testimony, you feel good about it, you like to go there again, you feel uplifted. But this is just you feel sad, you wonder, what I’ve been deceived, you really have nightmares, at least for a week.

RT: Again, short answer, the way people react to the temple experience depends on their culture. There are some people in some cultures who go to the temple and they react very positively and there are others who do not.

Question: Yeah, but if it’s the spirit, it should testify to you if you’re African or Indian, whatever.

Question: We hope the Holy Ghost could change his mind for an American or Swedish I mean, that’s not the way I feel.

MJ: I remember sitting with our first daughter, actually, who went on a mission to Germany, after her first temple endowment which I attended with her.

Question: When was that?

MJ: Pre-90. And I was her stake president, so I did my best to prepare her. Since then the church, as you know, has produced “Endowed From on High” which is the seventh lesson course for temple preparation, which I’m sure you must have in Sweden. But the temple, because we have a very practical and utilitarian religion, we don’t have the rich liturgy that the Catholics have or the Protestants. So the temple for most people initially is a very different experience, Hans, as it was for you.

Question: But the Holy Ghost, I mean—

we must be careful that we do not reject that which is good because it does not conform to a narrow pre-conception of goodness.

6.3 Unafraid to challenge our convictions

These conclusions suggest that there are no easy answers when it comes to finding truth—especially given the biases that we each hold. Finding truth requires that we scrutinize our assumptions and question our deepest held beliefs. Such piercing internal reflection may be uncomfortable, but it will ultimately lead us from a place where we merely think we know, to one of greater wisdom—a place of humility in the face of uncertainty and ultimately greater confidence in those things which have withstood the rigors of close scrutiny.

The reward for such investigation is likely worth the discomfort—the more accurately our internal maps align with reality, the greater our ability to comprehend and either adeptly control or peacefully accept the world around us. We should be unafraid to challenge our own convictions.

7 Additional reading

- [The Triple Path](#) - a profound synthesis of religious and scientific ideals which discusses truth and spiritual experiences in significant depth in chapter 5. (note: I am not the author of the book, although it has clearly influenced several points in this essay.)
- [MormonThink - Testimony & Spiritual Witnesses](#) - additional data and perspectives worthy of consideration (note: MormonThink is generally critical of the LDS viewpoint even though it sometimes presents itself as unbiased).
- [FairMormon - Can We Trust Our Feelings](#) (relevant apologetic response)
- [FairMormon - Is the “burning in the bosom” a reliable method of determining truth?](#) (relevant apologetic response)

MJ: Well, I know. I think my little daughter was quite worthy, but she was so disturbed, I'll say. So surprised by the nature of what happened there that I'm not sure the holy ghost had a chance to really help her that day. I remember sitting with her in the celestial room while she cried and said, dad what's this all about? And I wish I had done a better job. She has persisted and I said to her if you'll keep coming and keep learning and keep praying about it, you'll [...] and loves what she feels there. But it's taken some time. It isn't a tap we can always turn on.

Question: I think what you're saying now is your answer to everything. If we keep doing it, we will feel good about it.

Question: My first kill as a deer hunter was terrible, but I learned to love it. You know, I know it's an extreme, but the spirit should testify, I think, about the truth, whenever it is the truth. Do you know what I mean? I mean, I shouldn't need to go there 20 times to feel good. You know what I mean?

- [FairMormon - Why do I “feel the spirit” when watching movies?](#) (relevant apologetic response)
- [FairMormon - “Feeling the spirit” while listening to ex-Mormon “exit stories”](#) (relevant apologetic response)