

**1. Background:** Despite my doubts and concerns about various aspects of LDS doctrine and history, I remained in the Church for several years due to the spiritual and uplifting experiences I enjoyed as a member. But those spiritual feelings and emotions have also been a matter of study and inspection.

During my so-called “faith crisis,” I studied numerous LDS sources in hopes of finding answers to a variety of troubling questions about the Church. However, I became increasingly frustrated when most Church members refused to acknowledge, let alone discuss, some of the uncomfortable information I was discovering. Rather, virtually every time I reached out for guidance or support, my Church leaders said virtually the same thing: the facts, evidence, and logical arguments undermining the Church are unimportant because the spirit confirms that the Church is true.

For a while, I accepted, if not embraced, my Church leaders’ guidance. Specifically, I believed the Spirit teaches all truth (based on John 14:26 and John 15:26). I believed I could use the Spirit to decipher truth by doing the following: First, I would do a specific act (John 7:17) or ponder a specific issue (D&C 9:8-9). In doing so, I would then seek confirmation that the act or issue or question was true. I would receive this confirmation through certain feelings and sensations (D&C 9:8-9, Galatians 5:22-23) or, more often, through my mind and heart (D&C 8:2-3). Sometimes these feelings would be strong and immediate. But more often, these feelings and confirmations would arrive line upon line, precept upon precept over a long period of time (2 Nephi 28:30).

At times, this process worked and I believed I could decipher truth with my feelings. I felt positive emotions when I participated in various church activities such as singing hymns, praying, attending baptisms, and performing service. In turn, I believed these feelings served as confirmation from God that the Church was true.

Over time, however, I began to distrust the foregoing process when I determined that my premise (feelings are answers and instructions from God) and the resulting conclusion (therefore the Church is true) was based on unsound and faulty assumptions. Rather, the evidence demonstrates that feelings, emotions, and the “spirit” are unreliable in deciphering truth.

**2. Similar Experiences in Other Religions:** The Church teaches that we can obtain knowledge and truth through the power of the Holy Ghost, which is typically associated with certain feelings and sensations. However, the feelings typically associated with the Holy Ghost are felt by people of all different backgrounds in daily life. Many religious and non-religious individuals feel “spiritual” feelings (or get goosebumps, a lump in their throat, or teary-eyed, etc.) while watching fictional movies, listening to music, reading novels, or enjoying a hike. Likewise, most atheists would acknowledge feeling “tingling, warm sensations” in many activities.

But if God sends certain feelings and emotions to help individuals decipher truth, Mormons should be the only people who feel the Holy Ghost in determining whether their Church is true. However, this is simply not the case. People from all religions report having the same feelings that witness to them that their particular religion, beliefs, or church is true. In fact, members of other faiths often follow virtually the same method of finding truth as members of the LDS church. Even so, these non-members gain testimonies of their own church based, in large part, on the same spiritual feelings LDS members feel about their church. Obviously, not all religions can be right. And it seems more than a bit far-fetched to believe that only members of the LDS Church, who constitute a miniscule portion of the world’s population, are able to accurately use their feelings to decipher truth, spiritual or otherwise.

For example, this [video](#) contains the testimonies of individuals from 16 different religions all of whom believe God has told them through the spirit that they belong to God’s one true church. Many of these individuals testify that they know God is speaking to them when they feel emotions that are

stronger or different than the typical emotions they feel on a day-to-day basis. Therefore, they know these feelings and insights are from God as opposed to regular feelings or emotions. However, how can all these individuals experience the same feelings and emotions about their respective churches that Mormons feel about the LDS Church?

Moreover, consider the statements and experiences of the three following religious leaders:

- **Marshall Applewhite**, former leader of **Heaven's Gate**, told his followers that they could know whether his teachings were true by doing the following:

... 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?"

- **A.J. Miller**, leader of the **Divine Truth movement**, tells his followers to decipher truth in the following 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 ... And if that particular thing stays flowing I then, I know it's true.

- **Paul H. Dunn** exemplifies the unreliable nature of deciphering truth through "spiritual" feelings and promptings. Elder Dunn was a General Authority of the Church for many years and told incredible faith-promoting war and baseball stories. Some of his stories told of how God protected him in battle as enemy fire ripped away his clothing, gear, and helmet without ever touching his skin. Members of the Church shared how they really felt the Spirit as they listened to Elder Dunn's testimony and stories. Elder Dunn, however, lied about all his war and baseball stories and was forced to apologize to Church members. He became the first General Authority to gain "emeritus" status and was removed from public Church life.

Marshall Applewhite, A.J. Miller, and Elder Dunn all exemplify a larger point, namely, that many individuals can (and often do) feel warm, uplifting, and spiritual feelings even when hearing falsehoods, lies, and fabricated stories. But clearly, those spiritual feelings could not have been testifying that the teachings and stories of the foregoing leaders were true.

Likewise, many church members feel positive, spiritual feelings when reading the Book of Mormon or learning about various aspects of the gospel. These feelings, however, do not prove that the Book of Mormon or other aspects of LDS doctrine are true.

**3. Spiritual Feelings are Inherently Unreliable:** A recent **survey** asked people who believe in a God who answers prayers if they had prayed and asked God which religion is the most correct. Notably, 82 percent of the respondents stated they had received an answer from God (and 73 percent indicated they were "very sure" that God gave them an answer). Those respondents who claimed to have received an answer from God identified 22 different religions as God's true church. As noted by **Carson Calderwood**, there are a significant number of people that use the same evidence as Mormons (strong, spiritual feelings) to prove that their church is God's only true church. The fact that people of many different faiths use the same evidence in forming vastly different conclusions suggests that relying primarily on feelings and emotions is a subjective and unreliable method of deciphering truth. After all, how can members of one faith determine that their feelings are correct (or the "most correct") while members of others faiths are wrong?

Recent research into **DMT (N,N-Dimethyltryptamine)** provides additional evidence as to the unrelia-

bility of religious emotions in deciphering truth. DMT is powerful psychedelic drug and is often referred to as the “spirit molecule” because its effects include many features of religious experience, such as visions, voices, disembodied consciousness, powerful emotions, novel insights, and feelings of overwhelming significance. Dr. Rick Strassman administered 400 doses of DMT to 60 volunteers and their experiences mirror those of Mormons during religious experiences. For examples, those who were administered DMT reported feeling the following:

- A feeling of undeniable certainty that the experience was “more real than real”;
- A sense of wonder or awe and, at times, a separation of spirit from the body;
- Miraculous, long-term, positive changes in a person’s life because of the experience;
- Profound spiritual insights during the experience;
- Extraordinary joy and a sense of timelessness, a feeling of eternity;
- Increased positive emotions, powerfully moved to tears;
- Impressions of bright white lights and encounters with angelic entities;
- Visions of a tree of life (none of the volunteers were Mormon)

The participants that came from a religious background reported that the DMT feelings were either identical to or more real than the spiritual feelings they had felt previously. Based on these findings, Calderwood raised an important question: If individuals can’t tell the difference between chemically-induced feelings and spiritual feelings, how can they use these same feelings as an indicator of truth? For example, Calderwood asked: “If I gave you an injection of DMT after reading Harry Potter, and you felt powerful spiritual feelings, would that mean the book is God’s one true book? In other words, are these chemically-induced feelings just powerful biological emotions or are they actual spiritual experiences?” Calderwood then poses two additional questions to those who use spiritual feelings and emotions in deciphering truth: (1) Why are your conclusions using emotional reasoning correct and those of other faiths incorrect; and (2) How can you say those spiritual feelings and emotions are from God when those same feelings and emotions can be artificially induced through DMT or in a scientific lab?

**4. Feelings Change With “New” Information:** Prior to discovering many of the issues outlined above, I often felt positive, uplifting, and inspirational feelings about the Church. But as I exposed myself to new (albeit credible) sources of information about the Church, it became apparent that there are certain aspects of the Church that can, with varying degrees of certainty, be proven false. I began to realize that I built my belief system on a number of inspirational stories that, in many instances, were not based on fact. As these issues added up, I found it increasingly difficult to put my faith in those aspects of the Church that must be taken on faith alone.

For example, Joseph Smith made a largely empirical, testable claim that he could translate ancient documents. Yet, in analyzing the facts surrounding the Book of Abraham and the Kinderhook Plates, it became clear that the papyri and plates at issue were not what Joseph Smith claimed them to be. After discovering this information, I no longer felt spiritual feelings when reading the Book of Abraham and began to have serious questions about the legitimacy of the Book of Mormon (particularly in light of the fact that Joseph did not use the plates during the translation process and instead relied upon a seer stone placed in a hat).

However, these unsettling feelings surrounding my testimony were not completely new, as I occasionally felt them before experiencing my recent religious crisis of faith. Specifically, I have never felt comfortable with the doctrine of polygamy and I doubt most members have had spiritual witnesses as to its truthfulness. However, after reading about how the doctrine was revealed and instituted, I now feel absolutely sick about the practice. Furthermore, I have always felt uneasy during portions of the temple ceremony. I have felt baffled about the priesthood and temple ban relating to those of African lineage. And I emotionally and logically oppose the Church’s teachings as they relate to sexu-

al orientation and homosexuality.

Simply stated, feelings and emotions change based upon circumstances and context. The same feelings I previously felt telling me the Church was true now tell me that the Church is not what it purports to be.

**5. Truth Versus Utility:** Many individuals gauge the Church's truthfulness on its "fruits" or its positive impact upon the lives of its members. In that sense, the Church is true for many of its members. From my own experiences, the Church has had an enormously positive impact on my life.

Analyzing the Church primarily from its fruits rather than its history or doctrine is quite compelling. Doing so allows members to avoid difficult questions relating to the historicity of the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the credibility of Joseph Smith, or the origins and impetus of polygamy. More importantly, this approach allows members to re-work certain aspects of Mormonism so as to retain the value and guidance it provides to their lives.

Based on some of the troubling things we know about Church history, I think a great deal about the origins of the Church are more persuasive when not taken literally. A literal reading of the scriptures alienates much of our society. Many Church teachings originated in a different age with different views on social justice — an age in which slavery was legitimate, an age when discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation was the norm. Too often because of this history, the Church's teachings are used to justify intolerance today. In throwing off the shackles of a literalistic belief system, Church members are free to interpret various teachings and stories as a testament to the religious experiences of people from a different age.

Notwithstanding the foregoing discussion, there is an important distinction between truth and value. Just because something is valuable does not mean it is true. For example, I find value in the lessons we can learn from Jonah and the whale. But I do not believe Jonah actually lived in the belly of a whale for three days. I find value in the teachings found in the Book of Mormon, but I do not believe in the book's historicity.

More importantly, the Church does not embrace those whose testimony is based on value rather than on truth. If you want to hold a temple recommend, for example, you need to believe in the "restoration of the gospel in these the latter days." You need to believe that the President of the Church is the "Prophet, Seer, and Revelator and as the only person on the earth who possesses and is authorized to exercise all priesthood keys."

In fact, one of the things I struggle with about the Church is that it leaves so little room for anything other than wholesale acceptance of its truth claims. You can doubt, but you can't vocalize your doubts (at least too loudly). You can disagree with doctrine, but you can't disobey it. In large part, I am hesitant to embrace a less literalistic philosophy when the Church itself unequivocally rejects it. I agree that Mormonism at its core is largely a beautiful message. I also agree that we should judge the message on its merits rather than on its messengers. But on a practical level, Joseph Smith too often blocks my view of Mormonism's beauty. I struggle adhering to even the truthful words of someone who I deem to be dishonest.

If members with unconventional belief systems were more mainstream within the Church, perhaps I would still be attending. But the Church offers virtually no theological support for the idea that it has, in certain instances, been wrong and that certain aspects of its doctrine need clarification and reconciliation. In refusing to do so, the Church sustains a culture that, at least in my experience, stifles both intellectualism and unconventional beliefs. This, in turn, often results in unfavorable treatment of those who question and challenge Church history, doctrine, and culture.