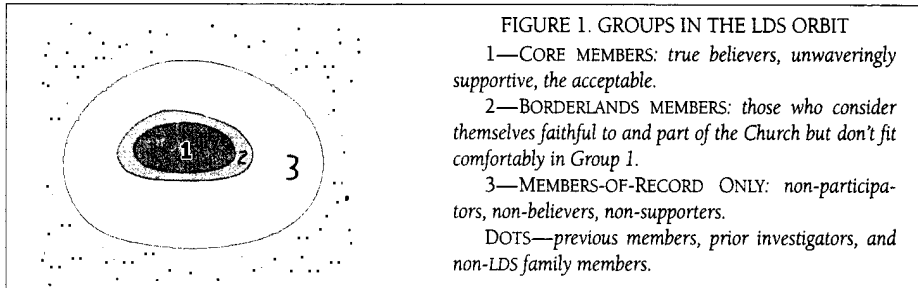


EASY COME, EASY GO: THOUGHTS ON GAINING AND LOSING A TESTIMONY

By D. Jeff Burton



TESTIMONY BEARING IS a regular practice at all levels of the church. There is also a general expectation that church members have or will gain a testimony. This tradition and expectation can be troublesome for many Borderlanders.¹

A typical shared testimony at the ward level goes something like this: "I testify/know/am certain the Book of Mormon is true. I know Joseph Smith was a prophet of God. I know that this is the one and only true church."

When I hear someone bear testimony, or if I know they have a testimony, I often ask, "How do you know these things are true?" or "How did you get your testimony?" (Such questioning is part of my curious nature and central to how I view myself as a "participating student" in the church.) Since members don't hear these kinds of questions very often, my query is often met by a start and a stare. But after a pause, the person will usually say something like, "Well, I've prayed about it, and the Holy Ghost has borne witness of the truth of these things to me." They will then often describe this witness in terms such as a "burning in the bosom" or a "feeling," terms which are familiar to us from the Doctrine and Covenants:

But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your *bosom shall burn*

within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. (D&C 9:8; italics mine)

I call this type of testimony a "feeling-based" testimony.

Others who respond to me (especially those who feel compelled to share with me how I might gain my own witness) will often quote or allude to Moroni's promise from the Book of Mormon:

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. (Moroni 10:4)²

I call this type of testimony a "manifestation-based" testimony.

A third method for gaining a testimony is less discussed, for it is a more time-consuming and difficult path, but it was presented at the April 2004 General Conference by Bishop Keith B. McMullin of the Church's Presiding Bishopric.³ According to Bishop McMullin, a testimony of Christ can come through a person's making four distinct efforts: (1) having the desire, (2) studying, (3) living Christ's teachings, and (4) offering prayer.⁴ I call this type of testimony a "life-tested" testimony.

LET'S explore the strengths and weaknesses of these three primary methods for gaining a testimony.

The "feeling-based" testimony. When a testimony results from a "feeling," or when someone pursues this type of testimony, I have observed four possible outcomes.

1. The member easily (after a few tries or within a relatively short time) receives the "feeling" and now has a testimony.

2. The member doesn't receive a "feeling," and this "no feeling" quandary leads inevitably to one or more of the following results:

a. The member, often after much effort and trial, eventually gets the "feeling" and is relieved.

b. Despite strenuous attempts, the member never gets the "feeling" and, because of various pressures, opts to say nothing (becomes a "closet doubter"), pretends as if he or she has a testimony, or even lies about it. "Yes, I have a testimony," this member will say when asked, e.g., in the temple recommend interview. (The pressures to be part of the group can be very high.)

c. The member never receives the "feeling" and develops emotional problems, including feelings of alienation, anger, and confusion. This often leads to feelings of guilt ("I must be an unrepentant sinner"); denial ("Of course, I believe," or "It's just a test," or "I must stop thinking this way"); shame ("What kind of a person must I be?"); anger ("Why me?"); and loneliness and estrangement ("I'm the only one with this problem," or "No one else understands," or "God must hate me").

d. The member never gets the "feeling" but opts to accept Church teachings through faith. (This is my own approach and one I urge others to try if this is an option for them.)

e. The member leaves church activity, not feeling as if (or not being treated as if) he or she is "one with the Saints." Very likely, many, many people have had this outcome in the past 175 years.

3. The member receives a "feeling" but at some future time loses the feeling-based testimony.

4. The member receives a "feeling" but soon after begins to wonder, "Was the feeling

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from God?” I’ve had people tell me, “I get the exact same feeling when I listen to *The Sound of Music* or see the American flag. So I’m really wondering now . . .” This outcome seems to be experienced most often by scientists, intellectuals, skeptics, and others who have been taught to think critically.

I’ve seen each of these last three “feeling” scenarios played out in the lives of many members. Unfortunately, nothing of real worth in life comes easily. Something as precious as a testimony cannot truly be gained through one or two prayers and the presence of a “feeling.” Feeling-based testimonies are too easily lost when members read non-correlated histories, have conflicts with other members of their congregation, or encounter instances when the “gospel plan” fails to work in their lives.

I and others have tried to shepherd folks with feeling-based testimonies during their testimony crises. (See, for instance, my book, *For Those Who Wonder: Managing Religious Doubts and Questions*.) As with any loss, when a loss of testimony occurs suddenly, it takes a while to gain some perspective and move on with life.⁵

The “manifestation-based” testimony. Outcomes for those whose testimonies are gained through “manifestation” are similar to the outcomes for those with a feeling-based testimony. Many active members have had a “manifestation” of some type. Those having trouble gaining a testimony often interpret the lack of manifestation as meaning that they are not “sincere” enough, or don’t have “real intent,” or lack “faith in Christ.” Much like a failure to receive a “feeling,” a failure to receive a manifestation can lead to various emotional dilemmas.

Another problem arises in the wide range of events that might be considered a “manifestation.” For some, a manifestation might be an answer to a prayer about school or a job, a healing blessing, a coincidence that saved a life, and so forth. One woman told me her testimony manifestation was a strange noise she heard in the temple one day; it was enough to convince her of the truthfulness of the proposition she was pondering. Others find their manifestation in unusual synchronicities. One man related to me the story of his “manifestation”: wondering about his distant

mother and then, on that very day, getting a letter from her. Others I have known use plumb bobs to receive answers or manifestations of various kinds. Clearly, one member’s “manifestation” is another’s foolishness.

Among the many I’ve asked, no one has related a vision nor a direct, revelatory “manifestation.”

The “life-tested” testimony. As you may already have inferred from my foregoing critiques, I believe the life-tested testimony is the surest way of coming to “know” that any proposition or claim is correct or right. Living a principle or acting on a propositional claim is similar to how one employs the scientific method—we test the proposition to see if it works under various conditions or if it is falsifiable. With each experimentation, each test, we gain or lose confidence in the truth or usefulness of the proposition. In a gospel context, those with “tested” testimonies are typically better grounded. Like the wise persons in Jesus’s analogy about those who have built their homes on a foundation of rock, people with life-tested testimonies have both *heard* and *acted upon* the principles (see Luke 6:46–49). They have applied their faith and are thus able to deal with anti-Mormon literature or more complex historical analyses that we are shielded from in regular church settings, as well as with personality conflicts in church contexts and other setbacks.

In his conference talk on the four-step method, Bishop McMullin suggested that a testimony of Christ is available to everyone. Although he didn’t strongly emphasize the effort required to gain a testimony via the steps he outlined, I think we can all agree that we cannot live Christ’s gospel principles (honesty, unselfishness, love, forgiveness) for fewer than months or years to achieve the experience necessary to firmly conclude that Christ-centered living and behavior is “right.” One must work to get a testimony of Christ.

Although Bishop McMullin didn’t state this directly, I think it is useful to remember that while one is on the path to a “life-tested” testimony, it is perfectly acceptable to walk in faith, to “hang in there” during the proving processes.⁶ ☞

NOTES

1. In previous columns, I have introduced the Borderland member as one who may have an unusual but LDS-compatible outlook on life, a distinctive way of thinking about faith, belief, and testimony, a different view of LDS history, some open questions about a particular aspect of the Church, reduced or modified activity, or feelings of not meeting Group 1 “acceptability” criteria. See Figure 1.

2. The wording in this verse is interesting: “ask God . . . if these things are *not* true. . .” (my emphasis). I’ve had people tell me, “Yes, the truth of it was manifest to me—it is *not* true.”

3. In a future column, I may describe testimonies borne at general conference and how they differ from those heard at the local level.

4. Bishop McMullin’s discussion was limited to gaining a testimony of Christ, but others have described similar methods for those who wish to gain a testimony of any gospel principle, such as the Word of Wisdom, fasting, or paying tithes.

5. Years ago, the renowned counselor Elizabeth Kubler-Ross identified five phases people will often pass through when a major loss occurs. These are: (1) shock and denial, (2) anger, (3) negotiation, (4) depression and sadness, and (5) acceptance of the reality of the situation. Generally, the “crisis stage” seems to last about six to eight weeks before the person begins to move on through the later phases. Many members who experience a loss of belief or testimony (or the loss of the expectation of a testimony) seem to follow this pattern quite closely. Once they reach the acceptance phase (which can take months and, in some cases, years) they are able to deal effectively with the situation, often finding healthy, creative, affirming ways to manage their faith and relationship with the church that had once nurtured them. The big questions for members in the crisis stages are: “How do I get on with the process of adaptation and healing?” and “What do I do about my changed perspectives once I achieve acceptance?” I will present some possible “What to do?” answers in a future column.

6. Faith, as I define it, is the willingness to accept a proposition in the absence of knowledge and act as if it were true. See my column, “Can a ‘Faith-Based’ Personal Religion Find a Home in a ‘Testimony-Based’ Church?” (SUNSTONE, October 2003, 64–67), in which I discuss terms and definitions.

Please send me any of your thoughts, experiences, or tales from life in the Borderlands.

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