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Ministering across Fault Lines of Belief and Community

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MINISTERING ACROSS FAULT LINES OF BELIEF AND COMMUNITY

Daniel Ellsworth

Review of David B. Ostler, *Bridges: Ministering to Those Who Question* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2019), 206 pp. \$32.95 (hardback), \$20.95 (paperback).

Abstract: *David Ostler's book Bridges: Ministering to Those Who Question addresses the daunting task of ministering to people who have grown disillusioned with the core doctrines and the community of believers they encounter in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This is perhaps the most challenging ministering effort a leader or member of the Church can undertake, and Bridges provides valuable insight into the process of disaffection as well as specific things that Church leaders and members can do to create a healthy environment for members to work through challenges to their faith. This review discusses those strengths of Bridges as a resource and also explores areas where the well-intentioned approaches discussed in the book can backfire, causing more harm than healing in a community of believing Latter-day Saints.*

In C. S. Lewis's masterful book *The Great Divorce*, a bus full of spirits travels from the dreariness of hell to the foothills of heaven, where each spirit is ministered to by heavenly guides. In one of the most interesting exchanges in the book, a heavenly spirit ministers to the spirit of an apostate Anglican bishop, with whom he shared friendship in mortality. The spirit's encouragements to believe are answered by the bishop with deconstructive, theoretical rejoinders that illustrate the bishop's cravings for intellectual abstraction over personal commitment. At one point, the bishop says of the theological opinions he taught in mortality:

They were not only honest but heroic. I asserted them fearlessly. When the doctrine of the Resurrection ceased to

commend itself to the critical faculties which God had given me, I openly rejected it. I preached my famous sermon. I defied the whole chapter. I took every risk.¹

The ministering spirit refutes the bishop's assertion, countering that there had been powerful social incentives in terms of prestige and fear of commitment for the bishop to hold and promote those skeptical views. The spirit steers the conversation to a specific choice he hopes the bishop will embrace:

We are not playing now. I have been talking of the past (your past and mine) only in order that you may turn from it forever. One wrench and the tooth will be out. You can begin as if nothing had ever gone wrong. White as snow. It's all true, you know. He is in me, for you, with that power. And — I have come a long journey to meet you. *You have seen Hell: you are in sight of Heaven. Will you, even now, repent and believe?*²

The idea that belief in the gospel message can be *chosen* is controversial. Some people seem born with the ability to believe, but restoration scripture also speaks of the ability to believe witness testimony as a gift (Doctrine and Covenants 46:14). However, if we feel inclined to view that gift as something allocated arbitrarily to mortals by divine whim, we are also told this and other spiritual gifts can be sought (D&C 46:8), with the qualifier that the seeking should be done “earnestly.” To my mind, one of the most underappreciated phrases in the Book of Mormon's narratives of the nature of belief is Nephi's recollection in 1 Nephi 2:16 that “I did cry unto the Lord; and behold he did visit me, and did soften my heart that I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father” We are not told of the duration of this process that culminated in Nephi's transition to belief, whether it was days, weeks, months, or an even more prolonged and iterative commitment.

What may be even more controversial is the idea that, as the ministering spirit in *The Great Divorce* indicated, belief can be the outgrowth of repentance. This assertion is deeply problematic if we view repentance only in terms of being the remedy for chosen sinful behavior. But if we adopt the proper biblical definition of repentance as “turning,” or a reorientation of the soul, repentance is a wonderful term for the set of decisions and behaviors that enable a contrite soul to return to belief. My own experience and that of others I know who have returned

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), 40–41.

2. *Ibid.*, 42–43, emphasis added.

to belief in the restored gospel after a period of doubt shows a common set of decisions that constitute our repentance, including the following:

- Reorienting to a faith that is based primarily in Christ.
- Abandoning cynicism and voices of accusation and deconstruction.
- Adopting better-informed assumptions about gospel concepts.
- Embracing mystery.
- Taking responsibility for our Church experience.
- Giving serious, sustained attention to witness testimony that spans from antiquity to the present day.

The nonbelieving bishop in *The Great Divorce* had powerful social incentives to embrace nonbelief, and there are similarly powerful emotional and ideological incentives, such as painful reflection on the problem of evil or a sense of unfairness about unequal distribution of spiritual gifts and privileges. Conversely, however, there are powerful emotional incentives for belief, such as the pain of guilt or the hope that life's injustices will someday be remedied by a loving God. One of the most powerful incentives for belief is the sense that, as the apostate bishop's ministering spirit said, "You are in sight of heaven." In mortality, this statement can perhaps most be felt to be true when one is part of a loving, caring, courageous community of believers. Creating that community is the subject of David Ostler's new book *Bridges: Ministering to Those Who Question*.

Bridges is the latest in what is now a growing body of writings devoted to addressing the problem of faith crisis in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The problem of loss of faith is not unique to our faith community; as Ostler explains in his first chapter, it is a problem among many religious communities in our day and age. Ostler's book is narrow in scope, however; it is addressed specifically to Latter-day Saints who are tasked and called to minister to those in crisis, and the book avoids many of the questions and issues of assumptions and expectations addressed in books such as Terryl and Fiona Givens' *The Crucible of Doubt*, Patrick Mason's *Planted*, and Michael Ash's *Shaken Faith Syndrome*. Each of those books and many more talks and presentations that could be cited have contributed immensely to our ability to rethink and reframe the issues that lead to faith crisis. In writing *Bridges*, however, Ostler undertook the extraordinary task of exploring the interpersonal aspects of faith crisis and how family and

other relationships are affected by the kinds of dialogue we engage in as part of our response. Without training or any real-world experience in this kind of dialogue, many of us stumble and fumble our way through interaction with loved ones in faith crisis and often aggravate personal situations already deeply painful. This problem is the core of David's effort in writing *Bridges* and the substance of his current life's work.

I will state a few things at the outset of this review: first, I speak as one who experienced a deep and traumatic faith crisis years ago. I am fortunate to be able to say I have recovered my faith and am happier in my faith and more committed to the mission and doctrines of the Church than I ever was before. Second, my mission in life closely dovetails with that of David Ostler. Having experienced a faith crisis, I serve with a team of people with similar experiences to manage an online community where we try to minister to those in crisis by sharing our love and our personal lessons learned. David Ostler and I have become frequent lunch and conversation partners, and I respect him and feel honored to call him a friend. Finally, I highly recommend this book for any member of the Church looking to understand people in faith crisis and how to engage with them in meaningful ways. I will personally be looking for this book on the bookshelves of Church leaders whose homes I visit in the future, and if I do not find it, I will encourage them to acquire and study it.

I would love to see the day when a member of the Church in faith crisis anywhere in the world feels comfortable saying aloud in Church meetings, "I have come across some information, and I don't know how to process it. I used to feel secure in my faith, but now I don't. I'm hurting so deeply. Please help me." And the ward responds by embracing that member and lovingly ministering in effective ways over a period of years if necessary, until that member is healed and returns to belief with new resources to effectively minister to others.

This ideal scenario is not happening nearly as often as it should, and *Bridges* hopes to explain why and how to make it a reality in our congregations. In this review, I hope to highlight some of the valuable insights from *Bridges* and also to explain things I wish David had said. I hope to give fair and charitable voice to my primary concern about the book, which is its avoidance of issues that could cause well-intentioned ministering to backfire, having the effect of spreading faith crisis among members of the Church rather than healing them. I hope my criticisms will be seen as a productive springboard for the development

of additional resources that fill in the gaps many people will sense in their reading of *Bridges*.

The Research that Led to Bridges

Ostler explains his impetus for the writing of *Bridges* in the book's introduction, as he relates his experience of being assigned along with his wife to minister to single members in his stake. He explains that around 80% of the singles in his stake were not attending Church, and in a decision I personally found gratifying to read, the Ostlers sent out a survey to each nonattending single, simply asking why they were not attending (viii). Despite the relatively few responses received, the information resulting from the survey and another conducted in partnership with leadingsaints.org brought to light painful disconnects between the nonattending singles and their families and former community as well as perceptions of inadequate training and resources for Church leaders assigned to minister and care for these members (12).

Personal Stories

Bridges includes compelling examples of personal stories, beginning with Mike (6–9), a formerly believing member of the Church who lost his faith after gaining exposure to aspects of Church history he had been unaware of during his youth and his formative adolescent and mission years. Next, we read of Amanda (9–10), also a formerly believing returned missionary who lost her faith as her “doctrinal shelf” — the euphemism many of us use to describe the place in our hearts and minds where we place issues we have trouble understanding — came crashing down in adulthood.

Both of these stories carry a special, important extra element: the appreciation that they feel for a listening ear, someone they are comfortable talking with about their struggles.

Another commonality in these stories speaks to what I view to be a glaring weakness in many surveys of deconversion: both Mike and Amanda express their commitment in terms of things they zealously did and believed, like serving missions and in other callings and marrying in the temple. They also describe the strength of their former testimonies of the restored gospel, which begs the question: what does this person mean by *testimony*? Would *testimony* in cases like this be characterized as *assent to beliefs held by their community*? One of the things I often ask people in these kinds of conversations is some form of the question “Did you ever personally experience anything that showed you that God is involved in the work of the Church?” I ask this question in an effort to

clarify the person's conceptualization of the word *testimony*, in contrast to terms like *commitment* or *zeal* or *dedication*. If someone went through adolescence and mission years mistaking dedication (enthusiasm in meeting community expectations) for testimony (personal verification of the truthfulness of something, which occurs independently of other people), then he or she is approaching faith crisis with a vastly diminished set of resources compared to someone who has independent experiential verification of God's involvement in the work of the Church. This problem of definition means that some lifelong members think they are approaching their questioning from the pinnacle of awareness and perspective, when in fact what they bring to the challenge in terms of inner resources is less than that of many of our new converts.

Ostler offers some conclusions based on his conversations with these formerly believing members, explaining that difficult issues in Church history, lack of Church venues for discussion of these issues, and interpersonal challenges often combine to create formidable challenges to struggling members who are looking to rebuild their faith (11).

Societal Changes and the Role of Technology

Ostler proceeds to discuss generational changes in perspective and the role that technology has in giving the younger generation vastly more exposure to information. He reiterates the statement made by President M. Russell Ballard in February 2016:

Gone are the days when a student asked an honest question and a teacher responded, "Don't worry about it!" Gone are the days when a student raised a sincere concern and a teacher bore his or her testimony as a response intended to avoid the issue. Gone are the days when students were protected from people who attacked the Church. Fortunately, the Lord provided this timely and timeless counsel to you teachers: "And as all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith." (24)

Ostler follows with his own summary of the challenge, that it can no longer be assumed that members of the Church looking for information will turn only to Church-approved materials or trust Church authorities as sources of information.

On a personal note, my view growing up in the 1980s and 1990s was that I did not need to delve too deeply into questions around Church

history or the nature of scripture. I trusted that if I ever had questions in those areas, I could turn to something written by either Hugh Nibley or Elder Bruce R. McConkie and have a quick answer at my disposal. In terms of epistemology (the ways we arrive at belief and knowledge), I had a very rudimentary authority-based epistemic framework based on complete trust in a few people I considered to be spiritual and scholarly experts in gospel issues.

What Ostler (and President Ballard) are trying to convey is the fragility and insufficiency of this approach in the Internet age, and they are doubtless correct. What I see as a missed opportunity in *Bridges* at this point is the fact that here Ostler could have explored what might constitute a mature and robust epistemic framework for Latter-day Saints. Elder D. Todd Christofferson made inroads in this effort in his April 2012 General Conference talk “The Doctrine of Christ,” wherein he described the council-like convergence of scripture, revelation, and authority in the process of establishing Church doctrine.³

Specific Issues

The avoidance of questions of epistemology is a lamentable recurring issue in *Bridges*, as the book proceeds in Chapter 3 into a discussion of “Why People Leave.” From Church history to LGBTQ policies and practices to gender roles to questions about leader revelation and more, the book explores a litany of reasons why people become frustrated with Church doctrines, teachings, and policies. Unstated is the fact that we as members of the Church determine for ourselves which sources of information (personal revelation, experience, scripture, witness testimony, intuition, and more) sit in council at our “epistemic table.” We determine which sources are given priority in any given line of questioning and how we respond when our epistemic sources are operating in tension. Perhaps it is too much to expect for this issue to be explored in *Bridges*, but epistemology is critical for understanding why certain issues trouble some people but not others. In my own ministering, I strongly encourage questioners to go through the exercise of defining their epistemic framework before approaching an issue, including explaining to themselves the strengths and weaknesses of each mode of inquiry in relationship to the question at hand. This is vastly more likely to result in the desired outcome of the questioner approaching the issue

3. D. Todd Christofferson, “The Doctrine of Christ,” *Ensign*, April 1, 2012, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2012/05/sunday-morning-session/the-doctrine-of-christ.html?lang=eng#title1>.

with the epistemic humility that a difficult and complex issue requires. In fairness to Ostler, I know of no book-length treatment of Latter-day Saint epistemology in existence, and this is a woeful gap in our resources as a community of believers.

In Chapter 4, Ostler discusses strategies for confronting challenges to faith, and this is an area of the book that shines. He recommends that members study Church history head on, including the difficult issues. In this area, Ostler and I probably share a wish to see basic concepts of historiography introduced to members of the Church of all ages. The ability to recognize that historians make choices in development of their historical narratives and inevitably bring their own world view and presuppositions to their craft would be an immeasurable help as members browse the Internet and encounter voices arriving at wildly divergent narratives using the same data.

Where Ostler encourages frank discussions of even less-inspiring aspects of Church history (47–50), I would go further and say we should teach why it is important to discuss our history in this way. We should see the sins, failures, and stumbles in our history as valuable teaching tools and also as correctives against our tendencies toward idolatry. Richard Rohr's discussion of the Old Testament is useful for illustrating this principle:

The Jewish people, in a sense against all odds and expectations, kept their complaining and avoiding, kept their arrogant and evil kings and their very critical prophets inside of their Bible. They read about them publicly and still do, and we read them also. These are passages that didn't tell the Jewish people how wonderful they were, but told them how terrible they were!

What you have built into the Hebrew Bible and strongly expressed by Jesus and the prophets is *the capacity for self-critical thinking. It is the first step beyond the dualistic mind and teaches us patience with ambiguity and mystery...*

The Jewish and Christian religions always have the power to correct themselves from inside because of these kinds of sacred texts.

This is quite rare in the history of religion. This is the self-criticism necessary to keep religion from its natural tendency toward arrogant self-assurance. It undercuts the possibility of any long-lasting group idolatry, even though it also deteriorates into cynicism, skepticism and post-modernism.

The Jewish people possessed an uncommon power to stand their ground, with God alone, before negative realities. That's

quite the opposite of what we often have today, which can feel like “making a religion out of your better moments.” *They made a religion out of their worst moments, which is probably why they have lasted so strongly to this day, even after the Holocaust.*⁴

One of the prominent subjects in Chapter 4 is an encouragement to “Focus on the Savior Jesus Christ” (50–52), and I wholeheartedly agree with this advice. I wish this had been an integral part of Ostler’s analysis from the beginning, as a question for his interview subjects. Latter-day Saint historian Richard Bushman has spent remarkable amounts of time ministering to people in faith crisis, and in several recent interviews, he has stated that the question of a person’s perception of Jesus Christ is now the only question he will explore with people who come to him in crisis:

People will often come to me when there’s a son-in-law on the verge of leaving the Church and they are hoping that I can say something that will turn him around. I’ve decided after a decade of doing this that I can’t. There’s no argument that I can give. If I try to argue with them it goes nowhere. It’s like Bible bashing in the mission field. It never gets anywhere.

So I don’t do much of that. I agree with the facts of what people say, all those things did happen, so I don’t confute those things. What I wanted them to see at first was there might be another possible way of looking at them, that you don’t have to see them as damning. But now I think more about these people’s person’s lives, and what those lives are going to be like if they leave the Church. How are they going to fill that hole, mend the relationships with their spouse or their mother, or someone or other? And how do they sort of complete their personal lives?

So my most common question nowadays is “How do you feel about Jesus Christ?” If they say, “He means everything to me,” I say, “You’re gonna be alright. Don’t worry about all this other stuff. Fiddle with it if you’d like, and worry about it, but if you can hold onto Jesus Christ you’ll be okay.”⁵

4. Rohr, Richard. *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality*. (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2007), 18–19, emphasis added.

5. Blair Hodges and Richard Bushman, “To Be Learned is Good,” January 23, 2018, in *MIPodcast*, <https://mi.byu.edu/mip-75-bushman/>.

As a reminder of the centrality of Jesus Christ in the restoration, and the consequences of relegating Jesus Christ to a peripheral role in our focus, consider this warning from then-Elder Dallin H. Oaks at Brigham Young University in 1993:

A few years ago I received a letter from a man who said he had attended an LDS testimony meeting and listened to seventeen testimonies without hearing the Savior mentioned or referred to in any way. He also wrote that the following Sunday he listened to a priesthood lesson, a Gospel Doctrine lesson, and seven sacrament meeting speakers without hearing any reference to Jesus Christ (see “Witnesses of Christ,” *Ensign*, November 1990, p. 30). Some may have considered that report an exaggeration or an extreme case. The similar accounts I have received in subsequent letters persuade me that this was not an isolated experience. In too many of our classes, in too many of our worship services, we are not teaching of Christ and testifying of Christ in the way we should.⁶

It may be that many of our contemporary challenges with faith crises have roots in our past failures as a people to make Jesus Christ the center of our faith. I regret to say that I can speak from personal experience that for many years of my life, my Church activity has been oriented around things other than Christ. Programs, ideas, personalities, questions, and even the community we call “The Body of Christ” can sometimes serve as mental and spiritual distractions from serious engagement with the reality of the divinity of Jesus Christ. Key to my emergence from the faith crisis experience has been my personal reorientation to Christ-centered faith, and Ostler articulates this well:

Church programs and leaders are not an end unto themselves. They are meant to help us come unto Christ by teaching and enabling us to love and serve others as he did. Our regard of and confidence in our leaders, past and present, and the institution of the Church are not the destination. They are the means whereby discipleship and our journey to be healed and become more Christlike begins. (53)

In discussing the centrality of Christ, I would add that our teaching of the reality of Christ should include very thorough and compelling

6. “Another Testament of Jesus Christ” Dallin H. Oaks, BYU Speeches, June 6, 1993, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/dallin-h-oaks/another-testament-jesus-christ/>.

explorations of grace. The ability to personally internalize the power of God's grace enables us to extend it to the community of believers around us as well as Church leaders past and present. This is a tremendous asset in our effort to transcend critics' relentless focus on the sins and failings of members of the Church. Similarly, the ability to extend grace to critics of the Church by looking at their behavior in the most generous terms possible enables believers to avoid being consumed with anger and a spirit of contention.

Ostler follows his admonition to re-center our teachings in Christ with discussions of the importance of keeping realistic expectations for leaders, being cautious about what we claim to be religious truth, holding to things we know, and embracing ambiguity. All these areas of discussion constitute wise counsel, and as evidenced by the quotes used to support this section, these are common elements of advice offered by those of us involved in ministry to people in faith crisis.

Evolution of Faith

Chapter 5 of *Bridges* discusses evolution of faith and relates the author's personal evolution over time toward a more universal and inclusive faith, using Fowler's stages of faith as a model for reference. While Fowler's stages are an important and useful tool in depicting transition to deeper and more mature faith, they also stand as a problematic map to a model of idealized faith that does not actually believe in any distinguishing doctrines. Many progressive-minded members of the Church gravitate toward this model, as its culminating stage 6 dispenses with hierarchies, exclusive claims to any kind of authority, and any notions of non-egalitarian theology. If a progressive-leaning member of the Church in faith crisis is offended by the Church's claims to exclusive authority to perform certain ordinances, for example, this person will see in Fowler stage 6 an ideal of transcendence over these and any other beliefs that might cause anyone to feel excluded.

This becomes especially problematic when people portray Jesus Christ as an exemplar of Fowler level 6, as if he had not lived as a devout adherent to the very exclusive and demanding religion of second temple Judaism. In a perverse misunderstanding of the life and mission of Christ, many members in faith crisis mentally flee to a liberal caricature of a Christ whose beliefs conformed to modern liberal sensibilities and who did not see his own religion as having any particular salvific value relative to the religions of Israel's neighbors. When Latter-day Saints in faith crisis express a continued belief in Christ, we would do well to help them understand that the same kinds of questions around historical narrative

and the provenance of scripture used to deconstruct faith in the restored gospel could be used to deconstruct the religion Jesus adhered to and loved. In fact, critical biblical scholarship has been engaged in this process of deconstruction of biblical religious narratives for centuries. Yet Jesus and other enlightened individuals we read of in the New Testament thrived in second temple Judaism, and Jesus on multiple occasions expressed his view that his religious system was authoritative and binding. Turning to Jesus in order to flee what one might view as conservative religious ideas and praxis is a fundamentally ill-informed undertaking.

Even though Fowler's stages are flawed and often misused, the basic reality underlying the Fowler model — the idea that faith can progress and evolve through stages over a lifetime — is immensely useful. Ostler is to be commended for putting forth a model that enables struggling members to remove the element of shame from their transition back to faith. Ostler is also to be commended for recognizing that major changes to one's paradigm are not necessary for everyone to enjoy a fulfilling life of faith:

Many Latter-day Saint adults stay in stage 3 their entire adult lives, having firm confidence in the Church and its leaders. Their faith is meaningful, rich, and vibrant — it defines their lives. For these individuals, their sure faith remains constant, and they can incorporate life experiences and challenges into their existing framework that was formed when they were young. (67)

Trust, Belonging, and Meaning

In chapter 6 of *Bridges*, Ostler discusses three concepts that he views as important for drawing people into continuous fulfilling activity in the Church:

- *Trust* is framed in terms of members' sense of confidence that their concerns will be handled appropriately by leaders.
- *Belonging* is our ability as a community to enable people to feel accepted as they are.
- *Meaning* is presented as the core purposes expressed in our teachings and praxis, and their relevance to members of our community.

Discussing each of these concepts often leads regrettably to tired questions of orthodoxy versus heterodoxy, and boundary maintenance versus inclusion. In my personal conversations with David Ostler,

I have expressed a desire to see these issues reframed in terms of mutual obligations and opportunities. *Bridges* does a wonderful service in helping leaders understand the importance of mature responses to people whose experiences, faith, or confidence in Church doctrines may not be at a level that enables them to relate to members around them in Church environments. In this chapter and the subsequent section on ministering, Ostler discusses the importance of non-judgmental responses to questions, sincere listening in difficult conversations, and avoiding temptations to label and to issue solutions that do not meet the person where they are.

These are all incredibly important concepts for ministering, and I would suggest that the reason they are not happening as widely as we might hope is they are extremely difficult in practice. And as both David Ostler and I are well aware, one of the tragic consequences of people's attempts to minister to members in faith crisis is loss of faith among those sent to minister. Faith crisis is inherently contagious, and until the underlying reasons for that are addressed, Ostler's lofty and important vision for ministering will never be adopted as widely as it could and should be. Without a sense of mutual obligations — as opposed to placing the burden of understanding and accommodating entirely on either the questioner or the community of believers — the efforts of leaders and others called to minister will backfire in ways that will likely lead to *less* of the loving inclusivity and vulnerability envisioned in *Bridges*. This problem and some proposed solutions are what I hope to convey in the remainder of this review.

Understanding the Member in Crisis

Bridges is a wonderful resource for teaching concepts of listening and empathy for people (unfortunately, like myself) for whom those skills do not come naturally. One of the great challenges I wish *Bridges* had addressed is the fact that many people with exceptional skills at listening and empathy have already been sent to minister to loved ones in faith crisis, and the outcome of their ministering has been their own loss of faith. This was documented well in the aforementioned example of Mike, whose ministry to his own brother set him on the course of nonbelief. Why? To answer that question, we need to have a very honest and sometimes uncomfortable conversation about the mental, emotional, and spiritual resources that members bring with them to their questioning.

Epistemology

Epistemology is, to my mind, the most undervalued concept in our discussions about gospel questioning. The ability to articulate the strengths and weaknesses of various sources of truth such as scripture, authorities, scholarship, personal revelation, witness testimony, and intuition, and how those sources can effectively interact to produce confidence — or lack of confidence — in a given proposition is an essential foundational skill in developing a robust faith that can withstand the debate orientation and deconstructive accusatory tactics employed in most criticism of the core doctrines of the Church. A person ministering to a member in crisis is very likely to encounter questions beginning with the phrase “How do you reconcile ...” followed by some combination of commonly-employed criticisms and accusations:

- ... the discrepancy between restoration scripture and the views of critical biblical scholars.
- ... errors or anachronisms in scripture.
- ... revisions to, or reversals of, prophetic teachings and directives.
- ... discrepancies between Church historical narratives presented in various venues in the past, and narratives officially offered now in the Gospel Topics Essays.

If the ministering member personally operates with an overly simplistic, authority-based epistemic framework, these questions might be devastating, as they were in the case of Mike and as they have been for numerous other people. Lack of understanding of epistemology is what I would regard as one of the two greatest factors that contribute to the contagiousness of faith crisis. Terryl Givens addressed a key aspect of scholarly epistemology in the 2017 Bushman Colloquium at BYU:

Prejudice, predisposition, or a ground of judgment is the provocation that invites challenge and rebuttal in any discursive community. We are no blank slate, and any attempt to emulate one is both self-deceptive and dangerous. The illusion of a neutral ground from which intellectual inquiry proceeds is a relic of Enlightenment optimism. We don’t need to be postmoderns to recognize that, as Nietzsche observed wryly, only “the animal lives unhistorically.” Not only are we

situated in history and in culture, but our history and our culture are always ineradicably situated in us.⁷

Truly, as Givens asserts, “We are no blank slate.” The struggling member, the minister, and all their sources of information are operating with definable epistemic frameworks. Understanding this enables the minister and struggling member to be very judicious in topics of conversation because conversation undertaken from different epistemic frameworks is fruitless, allowing people only to talk past each other. In practical application, it is impossible to understand members’ devotion to the work of the Church of Jesus Christ without embracing the witness testimony that is the core of Latter-day Saint epistemology and the beating heart of our religious community, from the First Vision to the Kirtland Temple dedication to the present-day manifestations confirming and validating the work of the Church. If a conversation partner is not willing to, at a minimum, be open to the validity of witness testimony in the work of the Church, then the number of gospel-related conversations I can have with that individual narrows almost to nil. For that reason, *declining to talk about the gospel* is sometimes the wisest approach in our ministering. We can be friends and have genuinely loving, caring relationships, but our productive conversations can happen only where we either share a common epistemic framework or are willing to suspend our non-shared epistemic commitments. This is likely possible in areas like sports, music, cuisine, or any number of other subjects, but not gospel teachings and praxis.

Forthright acknowledgement of our different epistemic commitments in matters of faith enables loving relationships to flourish around other areas of life where we can operate from a common perspective, and this emphasis on the importance of relationships is one of the salient themes in *Bridges*.

Vertical and Horizontal Faith

Students of religion often speak of religious systems as having vertical (God-oriented) and horizontal (people- or community-oriented) elements. Every Latter-day Saint and every person whom we minister to has some combination of vertical and horizontal dimensions to his or her faith. A person with a strong vertical orientation to faith may have that orientation due to transcendent spiritual experiences or perhaps

7. Terryl Givens, “The Poetics of Prejudice,” in J. Spencer Fluhman, Kathleen Flake, and Jed Woodworth, eds., *To Be Learned Is Good: Essays on Faith and Scholarship in Honor of Richard Lyman Bushman* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2017), 23.

just a deep and life-orienting hope in a conceptualization of God's final justice and mercy. A person with this strong vertical orientation is likely to be prone to faith crisis that stems from experience with the problem of evil or from questions around the provenance of scripture that informs that person's hope and trust in a loving and fair God.

By contrast, a person with a strong horizontal orientation is likely to experience faith crisis in response to interpersonal problems in the community that person loves, such as instances of abuse or other disturbing behavior by the people around him or her. A person whose orientation is entirely horizontal, lacking any authentic vertical dimension, is prone to deep disillusionment if the community of believers fails to measure up to that person's ideals or is incapable of conferring those senses of trust, belonging, and meaning that Ostler describes in *Bridges*.

The ideal Church experience cultivates a balance of vertical and horizontal orientation. With a healthy balance between the two orientations, a believer experiencing a period of disillusionment in his or her relationship with God can draw strength from a relationship with the community, and the reverse is also true. Samuel Brown beautifully explained the practical application of this principle in a discussion of the impact of mental health on one's relationship with God:

One of the many reasons that mental illness can be so devastating is that it interferes with the connection we have with God. Mental illness can destroy our emotional and spiritual senses. These are the times when the Church can be overwhelmingly important in our lives. People who love us — who are willing to reassure us, to pray with us, to walk the road with us — can bring the Holy Ghost to us. They can hold the Spirit for us, in trust, while we struggle, watchfully and patiently waiting for the time when we are ready to receive it again.

We often remind our adolescents and young adults that they will need to stand on their own, that they will need a testimony that can withstand separation from their parents. And it's true that our attachment to Church and gospel must be stronger than the vagaries of young adulthood. There must be within us something more than just conformity to whatever people around us say. But we must not believe that our walk of faith is solitary. We must be able to experience commitment to true principles and to the people of Zion that can resist mocking voices or temptations of the flesh. But we should not thereby forget that God and the Holy Ghost generally speak to us in

the context of our relationships with the saints. Our lives are deeply blessed by the people who carry the Spirit to us at times of great sadness or anxiety.⁸

Bridges contains stories of disaffection that are rooted in both vertical and horizontal factors in people's Church experiences. One of the things I wish the book had addressed is the importance of understanding this aspect of the spiritual perspective of both the minister and the struggling member. For example, if the individual assigned to minister has a very strong horizontal orientation and the struggling member has a strong vertical orientation, it is very unlikely, as in the case of conflicting epistemology, that they will be able to do anything other than talk past each other in discussions of faith. A leader should have a sense of this aspect of people's faith when planning for ministering.

Barriers to Ministry: Cynicism, Deconstruction, and Committed Nonbelief

Cynicism is an attitude of suspicion and negativity toward the motives of other people. When someone has grown cynical toward the Church, they attribute the worst of intentions to the Church, its leaders, and its members from the beginning of the restoration to the present.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said of cynicism:

It is only the cynic who claims "to speak the truth" at all times and in all places to all men in the same way, but who, in fact, displays nothing but a lifeless image of the truth. He dons the halo of the fanatical devotee of truth who can make no allowance for human weaknesses; but, in fact, he is destroying the living truth between men. He wounds shame, desecrates mystery, breaks confidence, betrays the community in which he lives, and laughs arrogantly at the devastation he has wrought and at the human weakness which "cannot bear the truth." He says truth is destructive and demands its victims, and he feels like a god above these feeble creatures and does not know that he is serving Satan.⁹

8. Samuel M. Brown, *First Principles and Ordinances* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2014) 123–24.

9. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "What Does it Mean to Tell the Truth?" in *The Bonhoeffer Reader*, ed. Clifford J. Green and Michael DeJonge (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 754.

Having gone through a period of years of cynicism myself, I can say from experience that it is extremely difficult to minister to people who are cynical, as they are likely to attribute ulterior motives to people sincerely trying to help them. Every misstep by a minister or other member is taken to be evidence of the general corruption and irredeemable flaws of the institutional Church. Ministers to cynical people should understand that the cynical person is engaging in a form of self-protection from events viewed as negative, such as changes in Church policy or corrections to our understanding of Church history or doctrines. The late Rachel Held Evans offered this profound insight on cynicism in the process of rebuilding her faith:

[W]hat I'm learning this time around, as I process my frustration and disappointment and as I catch those first ribbons of dawn's light on the horizon, is that I can't begin to heal until I've acknowledged my pain, and I can't acknowledge my pain until I've kicked my dependence on cynicism.

Cynicism is a powerful anesthetic we use to numb ourselves to pain, but which also, by nature, numbs us to truth and joy. Grief is healthy. Even anger can be healthy. But numbing ourselves with cynicism in an effort to avoid feeling those things is not.

When I write off all evangelicals as hateful and ignorant, I am numbing myself with cynicism.... When I roll my eyes and fold my arms and say, "Well, I know God can't be present over there," I am numbing myself with cynicism.

And I am missing out. I am missing out on a God who surprises us by showing up where we don't think God belongs.... Cynicism may help us create simpler storylines with good guys and bad guys, but it doesn't make us any better at telling the truth, which is that most of us are a frightening mix of good and evil, sinner and saint.¹⁰

Deconstruction is the process of "taking apart" a belief. Many of the Church's detractors hold up deconstruction as a tool for arriving at the truth, and to facilitate deconstruction, they put forward alternative naturalistic narratives to sacred history and voluminous accusations that they know the hearer cannot answer.

10. Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2015), 222.

Latter-day Saints should be aware that, contrary to detractors' assertions, deconstruction applies to true propositions as well as false ones. A stark example is the frequent loss of faith in a round Earth among people who stumble onto flat-Earth evangelism in their perusing of videos on YouTube. A BBC investigation summarizes the phenomenon:

All around the world, there are conspiracy theorists who believe the Earth is flat. And their community seems to be growing, judging by attendance at flat Earth conferences and events.

Flat Earthers say YouTube was key in helping them spread their message. One researcher found that of attendees at a flat-Earth conference, nearly all said they first came to the idea through the video-sharing platform.¹¹

In the case of both flat-Earth teachings and faith crisis, a very effective mode of deconstruction of true beliefs is immersion in sources that voice assertions and accusations at a greater volume than the hearer is able to answer. If a member has embraced detractors' false characterization of deconstruction as the most reliable tool for arriving at the truth, a minister unaware of the nature of deconstruction might be in danger of being overwhelmed by assertions and accusations communicated by the disaffected member during a ministering visit.

Committed Nonbelief is a term I use to describe the decision of some members to maintain nonbelief in core restoration doctrines as a viable permanent intellectual posture in the Church while also desiring to enjoy full participation with the community of believers. Committed nonbelievers often reject the angry and outrage-fueled antics of the Church's vocal detractors and do the Church an immense service in helping to steer people in faith crisis out of anger and into a frame of mind that allows for appreciation of the real benefits that come from participation in the community of believers.

Where this mindset perhaps affects the community of believers most adversely is in its reinterpretation or outright rejection of witness testimony — testimony that is one of the primary forces that binds together the community of believers. Since much of Latter-day Saint witness testimony supports claims to exclusive priesthood authority (particularly in the experiences and manifestations that accompany our temple ordinances), the widespread adoption and promotion of nonbelief

11. Marco Silva, "Flat Earth: How did YouTube help spread a conspiracy theory?" July 18, 2019, video, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/stories-49021903/flat-earth-how-did-youtube-help-spread-a-conspiracy-theory>.

among Church members would serve to undermine core aspects of Latter-day Saint community identity. To illustrate this problem, I offer the following witness testimony related by a woman named Sheera in Laura Rutter Strickling's wonderful *On Fire in Baltimore*:

After my mom died I would dream about her all the time, but I could never see her face. And every time I would dream, she was in a wheelchair or sick in bed. I would see her three times a week, and this was sad for me. I dreamed like that for two years, and I was grieving, oh, I was grieving! So Laura, when I finally got to go to the temple to do the baptisms for her — now I guess people think I'm making this stuff up, but I tell you, this is the honest truth — after I did the temple work for my mother, I dreamed about her and she wasn't sick anymore. I could see her face, and she wasn't in a wheelchair. And me and her was being together, you know, just doing things together.¹²

This story is an excellent example of why Latter-day Saints believe our temple work is of significant ontological value, as it shows a member of the Church receiving knowledge by revelation that temple ordinances have the ability to bring the healing power of the atonement of Christ to spirits in the next life. Imagine, for example, if one of Sheera's ward members were to voice nonbelief in the value of temple worship, or to express a belief that temple worship has no value other than a bonding exercise for the community. If ward members no longer have the confidence that their testimonies will be believed by the people around them, or if they expect that the ontological value of their testimonies will be diluted in the service of other ideological commitments, then that ward has ceased to be a community of believers. Moreover, this scenario raises the larger issue of creating spaces at Church to voice nonbelief and rejection of the Church's core doctrines: people who express a longing for this kind of dialogue in official Church spaces (87) also bear the responsibility for articulating what that would look like in practice, and where lines of propriety should be drawn.

Some nonbelieving members demonstrate an admirable sensitivity toward the cohesiveness of the community of believers they interact with at Church, and in that spirit they sometimes engage in private semantic redefinition of concepts in order to maintain comfortable participation

12. Laura Rutter Strickling, *On Fire in Baltimore: Black Mormon Women and Conversion in a Raging City*. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2018), 79.

with the community¹³ and avoid disrupting the normal group dynamics of the believers around them. Temple worship is an area of Latter-day Saint faith where belief in the core doctrines of the Church is paramount. President Gordon B. Hinckley said of temple worship:

I fear that some people are granted temple recommends before they are really prepared for them. I feel that sometimes we unduly rush people to the temple. Converts and those who have recently come into activity need a substantial measure of maturity in the Church....

As you know, it is expected that everyone who applies for a temple recommend will be asked certain specific questions to determine his or her worthiness. It goes without saying that there must be total honesty on the part of those who are interrogated....

Most important, and above all other qualifications, is the certain knowledge on the part of a recommend holder that God our Eternal Father lives, that Jesus Christ is the living Son of the living God, and that this is their sacred and divine work....

I know it is difficult for a bishop to deny a recommend to someone who is in his ward and who may be on the borderline with reference to personal behavior. Such denial may be offensive to the applicant. But he or she should know that unless there is true worthiness, there will be no blessing gained, and condemnation will fall upon the head of him or her who unworthily crosses the threshold of the House of God.¹⁴

Temple recommend interviews are an example of the importance of members interacting with each other and with Church leaders in an authentic way. If ward members are always suspicious of each other's ability to operate with common definitions of terms, for example, how much authentic gospel conversation can take place at the ward level, and therefore, in what sense is that ward a community?

My own view, based upon personal observation, is that the Church is capable of accommodating a wide range of interpretations of many concepts as well as a wide range of levels of belief. But for members to accept and normalize nonbelief in the Church's core doctrines is not desirable,

13. "Temple Recommend Questions," *LDS Church is True* (blog), November 6, 2017, <https://www.Churchistrue.com/temple-recommend-questions/>.

14. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Keeping the Temple Holy," *Ensign*, April 7, 1990, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1990/05/keeping-the-temple-holy?lang=eng>.

nor is it possible in light of the witness testimony in our community. I and others who through experience can bear personal witness of the divinity of Jesus Christ, for example, cannot with integrity embrace a naturalistic, mythical, or pantheistic conceptualization of Christ in lieu of the Church's standard articulated in *The Living Christ*.¹⁵ The missionary experiences of Church members and the temple experiences that validate our bringing people of other faiths into post-mortal institutional membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, similarly cannot be reconciled with naturalistic and pantheistic ideological commitments. As with the spirit ministering to the unbelieving bishop in *The Great Divorce*, a leader with stewardship over a nonbelieving member should not lower his or her hopes to the level of mere spiritual détente. Leaders should hope and strive for nothing less than that the member will “repent, and believe.” As discussed in *Bridges*, the leader should actively work to create a ward environment where members feel they are “in sight of Heaven,” where a nonbelieving member's doubt is met with kindness, compassion, fasting, service, and other loving interactions that can sustain the nonbeliever through what may be years and possibly even decades of personal reorientation of the soul.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I reiterate my recommendation of *Bridges* as a resource for leaders who are wondering how to minister to people who are questioning the core doctrines of the Church. The book's vision of inclusiveness, its practical tips for mature engagement with people outside the norm in our faith community, and its encouragement to get outside our comfort zones and listen to people's pain are welcome counsel that, if followed, would likely result in healed relationships and miracles.

Believing and nonbelieving members often engage in volatile and unproductive arguments over “boundary maintenance,” when it would be much more helpful to transition to a discussion of shared obligations and opportunities. If *Bridges* is a good articulation of the obligations and opportunities of the leader and minister, then it is critically important to also articulate the obligations and opportunities of the person receiving the minister's heartfelt best effort. In situations where a questioning member is willing or eager to engage in gospel conversation, I would strongly

15. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “The Living Christ,” January 1, 2000, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2000/04/the-living-christ-the-testimony-of-the-apostles-the-church-of-jesus-christ-of-latter-day-saints?lang=eng>.

encourage leaders to ensure common awareness and understanding in the areas of epistemology and vertical/horizontal faith orientation. For the sake of the minister, it is essential to secure shared commitment not to engage in cynical or deconstructive messaging. In the ward environment, committed nonbelievers should resolve to utilize commonly-understood definitions of core gospel concepts, rather than obfuscating with semantics in order to maintain a facade of commonality of belief.

My misgivings about *Bridges* have to do with things the book did not include, and I further wish the book had expressed some hope that for some people in faith crisis, a return to full belief in the core doctrines of the Church is possible. I and many others stand as witnesses that this is possible without compromising intellectual and spiritual integrity. Sometimes “less is more,” as envisioned with Ostler’s emphasis on pure listening; sometimes, however, “more is more” and we can create environments and provide resources that help people return to faith. Much work remains to be done in getting tools and resources to where ministers need them and in helping members of the Church to develop and mature in our approaches to faith. I applaud my friend David Ostler’s fine contribution to this effort.

I close with a poem written by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn as he reflected upon his return to faith. His return came about not by accounting for every possible counterargument and criticism in a way that would satisfy his prodigious intellect; it came through the contemplation and the reorientation of soul that he experienced in one of Stalin’s gulags:

When was it that I completely
 Scattered the good seeds, one and all?
 For after all I spent my boyhood
 In the bright singing of Thy temples.
 Bookish subtleties sparkled brightly,
 Piercing my arrogant brain,
 The secrets of the world were ... in my grasp,
 Life’s destiny ... as pliable as wax.
 Blood seethed — and every swirl
 Gleamed iridescently before me,
 Without a rumble the building of my faith
 Quietly crumbled within my heart.
 But passing here between being and nothingness,
 Stumbling and clutching at the edge,

I look behind me with a grateful tremor
Upon the life that I have lived.

Not with good judgment nor with desire
Are its twists and turns illumined.
But with the even glow of the Higher Meaning
Which became apparent to me only later on.

And now with measuring cup returned to me,
Scooping up the living water,

God of the Universe! I believe again!

***Though I renounced You, You were with me!*¹⁶**

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16. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956: an experiment in literary investigation*, vol. 2 (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 614–15, emphasis added.