

Questions and Answers

M. RUSSELL BALLARD

I am now in my ninetieth year and have been happily married to my dear wife, Barbara, for sixty-six years. We have been blessed with seven children, forty-three grandchildren, and eighty-six great-grandchildren—with more on the way!

I want to include you in our family today. I would like you to picture me as your grandfather who believes in you and who is cheering for you. I love you and constantly pray for you.

A year ago I spoke to our full-time religious educators and explained that we need to listen more and do our best to respond to sincere questions.¹ An adapted version of that talk appeared in the *Ensign* magazine last December with the hope that all parents, Church leaders, and teachers would do their best to listen and to respond to the questions from those they love.²

Recently I learned about a time when Joseph Smith answered twenty questions he had received. The questions, along with his responses, were published in the Church's newspaper, the *Elders' Journal*, in July 1838.

We do not have time to explore those twenty questions, but I did pick two of them. The first is an excellent question: "What are the fundamental principles of your religion?"

The Prophet responded:

*The fundamental principles of our religion [are] the testimony of the apostles and prophets concerning Jesus Christ, "that he died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended up into heaven"; and all other things are only appendages to these, which pertain to our religion.*³

Joseph's answer reminds us what is most important and essential: the core gospel message of the restored Church of Jesus Christ.

I smiled at Joseph's response to another question in the series: "Did not Jo Smith steal his wife?"

The Prophet's tongue-in-cheek answer reveals his witty personality: "Ask her; she was of age, she can answer for herself."⁴

Since then, Church leaders have taken many opportunities to respond to questions in various settings.

Unfortunately, passing around a portable microphone in the Marriott Center is virtually impossible today, so I invited two local young

M. Russell Ballard, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, delivered this devotional address on November 14, 2017.

single adult stake presidents and several BYU professors to solicit questions in advance for my consideration in preparing my talk for you.

In the end, I was surprised how many questions you have. I received 767 of them! They covered a variety of topics, including life at BYU, dating, doctrine, marriage, revelation, seeking perfection, and showing love to others.

I wish I could respond to every question. However, reviewing the questions has been a blessing to me because it gave me another window through which to consider the issues and challenges you face.

As we begin to consider some of your questions, it is important to remember that I am a General Authority, but that does not make me an *authority in general!*

My calling and life experiences allow me to respond to certain types of questions. There are other types of questions that require an expert in a specific subject matter. This is exactly what I do when I need an answer to such questions: I seek help from others, including those with degrees and expertise in such fields.

I worry sometimes that members expect too much from Church leaders and teachers—expecting them to be experts in subjects well beyond their duties and responsibilities. The Lord called the apostles and prophets to invite others to come unto Christ—not to obtain advanced degrees in ancient history, biblical studies, and other fields that may be useful in answering *all* the questions we may have about scriptures, history, and the Church. Our primary duty is to build up the Church, teach the doctrine of Christ, and help those in need of help.

Fortunately the Lord provided this counsel for those asking questions:

*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.*⁵

If you have a question that requires an expert, please take the time to find a thoughtful and qualified expert to help you. There are many on

this campus and elsewhere who have the degrees and expertise to respond and give some insight to most of these types of questions.

Now let's turn our attention to a few of the questions you have submitted to me. I reviewed them to cover as broadly as possible the same topics mentioned many different times.

Question: How do we differentiate between debilitating perfectionism and Christ's invitation to become perfect like Him?

We live in a world of comparison. Social media has made this worse as we go online and compare our seemingly less exciting lives with the “fake lives” we see online. Many of those fake lives are edited, boastful, and unreal. Some may have unrealistic expectations that they should be happy all the time, and if they are not, they feel like something is wrong with them.⁶

We should not compare ourselves with others. Please remember that the Savior is interested only in our personal growth. Even He “continued from grace to grace, until he received a fulness.”⁷

Regarding those who will receive a fulness, the Lord said:

*These are they who are just men [and women] made perfect through Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, who wrought out this perfect atonement through the shedding of his own blood.*⁸

It is clear that we are “made perfect” through Christ's “perfect atonement” as we make and keep sacred covenants, including partaking weekly of the sacrament, which allows us to repent and grow so we can *become* Saints—the true, faithful, and redeemed sons and daughters of God. Remember, perfection is a lifelong journey, not a single event.

Question: As a woman, I sometimes feel guilty for pursuing an education degree. How do I balance pursuing my education and preparing for marriage?

Church leaders have counseled young adults on this topic for some time. For example, President Gordon B. Hinckley said:

You must get all of the education that you possibly can. Life has become so complex and competitive.⁹

I echo President Hinckley's advice: get as much education as possible and plan on being employed sometime in your life after college. At the same time, prepare for marriage and family. Some women will choose to work and raise a family. Others will need to work because that will be the only way to support themselves. Others may not need to be employed because their husbands can support the family through his income.

Some married women will become single through the early death of a spouse or because of divorce, so they will need the skills to support themselves and their children in such a situation.

My basic counsel is to not delay marriage because of educational goals. You can accomplish both with hard work, sacrifice, and planning; in fact, with a companion's support you can be even more successful.

Question: What message do you have for LGBT young single adults?

I want anyone who is a member of the Church who is gay or lesbian to know I believe you have a place in the kingdom and I recognize that sometimes it may be difficult for you to see where you fit in the Lord's Church, but you do.

We need to listen to and understand what our LGBT brothers and sisters are feeling and experiencing. Certainly we must do better than we have done in the past so that all members feel they have a spiritual home where their brothers and sisters love them and where they have a place to worship and serve the Lord.

When we love God, we make and strive to keep our sacred covenants. I testify that living gospel commandments brings anyone untold blessings, allowing us to become our very best selves—exactly who God wants us to be.

Question: Where does the Church stand on LGBT civil rights?

We believe that the core rights of citizenship should be protected for all people—for LGBT

people, for people of all faiths, and for everyone else. In essence, this means fairness for all.

The Church believes the best approach to balancing these rights is to protect the core rights of all groups and then to find reasonable compromises in other areas when rights conflict. This is the approach the Church endorsed as part of the recent Utah nondiscrimination legislation. We condemn, in the strongest terms, bullying or harassment of any kind. Every person is a child of God. Everyone is entitled to love and respect.

The reason that the Church supported the LoveLoud festival here in Utah County was to send a strong message that LGBT youth or anyone else should never be mistreated, and if any were troubled, they should seek help from friends, family members, and trained professionals.

I am aware of the problem of suicide. I have had close family and friends who have taken their own lives. I have studied this matter, and I wrote an article for the *Ensign* magazine entitled "Suicide: Some Things We Know, and Some We Do Not."¹⁰ Suicide is a very complicated subject. Experts point out that there are multiple causes—including anxiety, depression, and chemical imbalance—that can lead to despair and loss of self-control.

Be careful in what you say about suicide and recognize that we do not know the full circumstances surrounding every suicide. The Lord alone has all the facts, and only He would know the intent of one's heart. We should not judge those who do take their own lives, and we should support and comfort those who are left behind after such a death of a loved one.

Finally, always remember that every life is precious—a gift from a loving Heavenly Father.

Question: My boyfriend struggles with pornography. What should I do?

Everyone you meet will have had challenges in life. Pornography is one of the main challenges we face today. However, pornography seems to be winning the day in destroying lives, relationships, and families.

Anyone who is considering marriage deserves transparency and complete honesty with her or his intended spouse. Talk with each other and find out where a person's heart is and what he or she is doing to become "a Saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord."¹¹

However, you shouldn't be asking these kinds of personal questions when you first meet someone—and certainly not on the first date!

If you are in a relationship in which your date is sincerely trying to find freedom from habitual use or addiction to this "new drug," you may be able to help him or her. Too many men and women suffer in silence because we have unintentionally demonized those who are addicted to pornography. Parents, family members, and friends can do much more to help those in trouble by being willing to listen and offer support and encouragement.

Nevertheless, boyfriends and girlfriends are not responsible to "save" their friends from sin; each person has that responsibility for himself.

Only you can decide, with the Lord's help, how to proceed in a relationship in which pornography plays a role in the life of a potential future companion. If you choose to remain in a relationship with someone struggling with this temptation, help him or her turn to God in prayer, in fasting, and in regular scripture study. Additionally, encourage visits with parents, family members, priesthood leaders, and professional counselors to get additional help and support.

There is always hope if they sincerely choose to fight this battle. It may not be easy, but it is worth it!

Question: How can I tell if I am forgiven?

The Lord provided a clear and simple answer:

Behold, he [or she] who has repented of his [or her] sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more.

*By this ye may know if a man [or a woman] repenteth of his [or her] sins—behold, he [or she] will confess them and forsake them.*¹²

Great joy results when we experience true repentance by confessing and forsaking! That will bring the peace we seek.

Question: In Provo, where everyone seems to be Church members, how do we do missionary work?

We have two missions in this area: the Utah Provo and the Utah Orem Missions. You are in the mission field! The Lord has brought many of His sons and daughters to Utah County to find the gospel.

I invite you to find one person before Christmas to bring to Church by being kind and by helping and inviting that person to learn more about Jesus Christ. That may be the best gift you can give to the Savior this Christmas!

Question: One of my Church leaders did things that hurt my trust. How can I get over it?

I know this happens, because the Lord has only mortals to work with as He invites us to receive His blessings, ordinances, and words.

I can imagine how you feel, because we live in a world in which people sometimes say hurtful things, misuse the trust they have been given, and don't always live Jesus's teachings as they should. We are, after all, human—we are fallible, flawed, and imperfect.

Please remember that at some point in your life you may disappoint and fail others too. Some of those you fail may be family members, Church brothers and sisters, and friends. No father, no mother, no child is perfect. No professor, no student, no missionary, no mission president is perfect.

The Lord provides the only real solution to living with other mortals: He asks us to forgive and love one another. Last general conference I said for you to stay on your "trek" as you continue life's journey to a glorious eternal destiny.¹³

Question: What are some of the responsibilities you have in addition to speaking at general conference?

Well, I worry about each one of you just like I worry about my own family!

One of our main assignments as apostles is to watch over and take care of Heavenly Father's children. To do so, we try to understand those we meet with and teach, encourage, help, lift, and support them.

One way I personally attempt to do this is by being here with you today. I want to know your concerns and challenges because the more I know you, the better I am able to minister to you.

We think about you, we pray and fast for you, and we spend our lives trying to guide you. None of the Twelve labor only from eight a.m. to five p.m. or for just five days a week, and our dear wives unselfishly support us in our demanding sacred callings. When I was called to serve in the Quorum of the Twelve, I gave up my dreams of early retirement and any real sense of privacy. As you know, my release from my calling is *not* my best alternative right now! However, all of the sacrifices and challenges Barbara and I face in my calling are well worth the joy we experience in testifying of Christ to the world and in associating with our dear brothers and sisters.

Question: How can young women who have chosen not to serve a mission feel as valued as those who have served?

I recognize that one of the challenges of living in any college town is that everyone assumes you are going to school if you are a young single adult. For those who choose not to attend college after high school, it can be discouraging when people seem to always ask, "What is your major?"

I know this because I went to work following my mission. I did not finish college. I have experienced from time to time feelings of disappointment when asked about my education.

The same is true when it comes to missions. Most people assume that if you are a young single adult living in Utah County, you have served or will serve a mission.

Please remember President Thomas S. Monson's announcement about lowering the age for missionary service. He observed:

*Many young women [will choose to] serve, but they are not under the same mandate to serve as are the young men.*¹⁴

However, studying the gospel and sharing it daily can be accomplished by anyone with or without an official call. Please remember that *it doesn't take a name tag to do missionary work!*

You can study, defend, and share the gospel every day through social media and, most important, by reaching out personally to people around you.

Question: If I have family or friends who are less active, how far do I go in my attempts to bring them back?

My answer is please do not preach to them! Your family members or friends already know the Church's teachings. They don't need another lecture! What they need—what we all need—is love and understanding, not judging. Share your positive experiences of living the gospel. *The most powerful thing you can do is share your spiritual experiences with family and friends.* Also, be genuinely interested in their lives, their successes, and their challenges. Always be warm, gentle, loving, and kind.

Question: I read the scriptures, pray sincerely, and follow the commandments to the best of my ability, but I rarely feel the Spirit. What am I doing wrong?

You are not the only one to feel this way. President Brigham Young was once asked a similar question: "Why is it that the Lord is not always at our side?"

President Young responded:

[Men and women] *must be able to demonstrate that [they are] for God and to develop [their] own resources so that [they] can act independently and yet humbly. It is the way it is because we must learn to be righteous in the dark.*¹⁵

I know life can be complex, busy, and challenging. Yet in one sense, the gospel is very simple. If we keep focused on the core message of the

Restoration—“Jesus Christ, and him crucified”¹⁶—most things will work out over time to our satisfaction.

Conclusion

It is time now to thank you for the questions you have submitted! I wish we could discuss all of them!

You may be interested to know that Elder Dallin H. Oaks and I will be participating in a Face to Face session with young single adults worldwide this Sunday, November 19, at 6:00 p.m. mountain standard time. We will respond to questions submitted by young single adults from around the world.¹⁷ You can check LDS.org for viewing options.

I close with three suggestions about seeking answers to gospel questions.

First, while searching, studying, and praying for answers, please remember that you have to be living right to get the answers you seek. As one well-known historian wrote:

*Guilt clouds the mind. If you are knowingly sinning, you will subconsciously want to separate yourself from God and find reasons for denying his power.*¹⁸

Second, my dear young friends, please take time to “be still, and know that I am God.”¹⁹ Most all of our concerns in life are answered in the quiet times of thinking, praying, and reaching out to Heavenly Father and the Lord Jesus Christ for guidance, peace, and joy as we strive to live the gospel.

And finally, please keep focused on what is really essential. Don’t look beyond the mark. Trust Heavenly Father. He has given us His eternal plan, so “stay in the boat and hold on!”²⁰ We love you and we need you now and in the years to come.

May the Lord bless you individually, may you have peace in your lives, may you love the gospel, and may you find it easy to repent and strive to do what Heavenly Father would like you to do. I leave you my testimony that Jesus Christ is the Savior and the Redeemer of the world. This is His Church. Let us honor Him and strive to keep His commandments is my humble prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See M. Russell Ballard, “The Opportunities and Responsibilities of CES Teachers in the 21st Century,” address to CES religious educators, Salt Lake City, 26 February 2016, lds.org/broadcasts/article/evening-with-a-general-authority/2016/02/the-opportunities-and-responsibilities-of-ces-teachers-in-the-21st-century?lang=eng.

2. See M. Russell Ballard, “By Study and by Faith,” *Ensign*, December 2016.

3. Joseph Smith, “Far West, MO. July, 1838,” *Elders’ Journal* 1, no. 3 (July 1838): 44.

4. Joseph Smith, “Far West,” 43.

5. D&C 88:118; emphasis added.

6. See Gordon E. Limb, “Millennials and Mental Health,” presentation given to the Church Area Committee, Salt Lake City, 8 November 2017.

7. D&C 93:13.

8. D&C 76:69; emphasis added.

9. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Words of the Prophet: Seek Learning,” *New Era*, September 2007.

10. See M. Russell Ballard, “Suicide: Some Things We Know, and Some We Do Not,” *Ensign*, October 1987.

11. Mosiah 3:19.

12. D&C 58:42–43; emphasis added.

13. See M. Russell Ballard, “The Trek Continues!” *Ensign*, November 2017.

14. Thomas S. Monson, “Welcome to Conference,” *Ensign*, November 2012; emphasis added.

15. Brigham Young’s Office Journal, 28 January 1857, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; emphasis added.

16. 1 Corinthians 2:2.

17. See “Young Single Adult Face to Face with Elder Oaks and Elder Ballard,” Events, *Church News*, 19 November 2017, lds.org/church/events/face-to-face-for-young-adults-with-elder-oaks-and-elder-ballard?lang=eng.

18. Richard Lyman Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith: An Author’s Diary* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 110–11.

19. Psalm 46:10.

20. M. Russell Ballard, “Stay in the Boat and Hold On!” *Ensign*, November 2014.