

Defending the Faith: Critics misunderstand the nature of faith

By [Daniel Peterson](#), For the Deseret News
Published: Thursday, Dec. 4 2014 4:00 a.m. MST

“Testimony,” [President Harold B. Lee once observed](#), “isn’t something you have today, and you are going to have always. A testimony is fragile. It is as hard to hold as a moonbeam. It is something you have to recapture every day of your life.”

Some critics have mocked such statements. Factual propositions, they say, don’t need to be “recaptured” every day. Chemists don’t hold meetings in which they express their confidence that water molecules are composed of an atom of oxygen accompanied by two atoms of hydrogen. Scientists feel no need to declare their unshakeable faith in Avogadro’s number or the importance of the covalent bond.

But such criticism misunderstands the nature of faith. Religious faith can’t be reduced to the merely intellectual affirmation of certain propositions — for example, that triangles have 180 degrees, or that Napoleon was defeated at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, or, in my judgment, even that Jesus rose from the dead. “Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well,” reads [James 2:19](#), “the devils also believe, and tremble.” Although factual propositions are an important part of religious faith, such faith also includes a relationship of trust, love and confidence in a divine person. (I’ve already argued this from another angle in a column in 2011 titled "[What exactly does 'faith' mean? Trust removes misunderstanding.](#)")

The Bible clearly suggests that faith in God involves a personal relationship via its frequent comparison of the relationship between the Lord and his people to that of a husband and wife. (See, among many such passages, [Isaiah 54:1-8](#), [61:10](#), [62:5](#), [Hosea 2:16-20](#)). Thus, for example — in what surely must be one of the worst assignments ever extended — the Old Testament prophet Hosea was commanded to marry a harlot in order that their marriage might illustrate Israel’s unfaithfulness to the Lord. That is why Jesus is referred to in the New Testament as a “bridegroom.” And the Savior’s teaching in [Matthew 16:4](#), that “a wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign,” is almost certainly to be understood in this light.

Returning to President Lee’s statement, quoted above, we can easily see how maintaining a relationship, as contrasted with merely continuing to accept a factual proposition, requires daily effort. Relationships are fragile.

It’s pretty easy for a husband to recall the fact that he’s married, just as it’s easy for a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to remember that she’s been baptized. But merely knowing that one has entered into such a covenant relationship as marriage or LDS Church membership doesn’t guarantee that one will continue to care about that fact. A husband who is surrounded by other women but who’s had little contact, or little positive contact, with his wife over a prolonged period may well remain faithful to her, but, the weaker their relationship becomes, the less likely that will become.

This is why husbands and wives who value their marriages will cultivate them by spending time together, forming rich shared memories, serving one another and listening to each other.

Thus, regarding relationships, we could rephrase President Lee's quote to say: “A strong relationship with a loved one isn't something you have today, and you are going to have always. Such a relationship is fragile. It is as hard to hold as a moonbeam. It is something you have to recapture every day of your life.”

Likewise, a strong relationship with God must be cultivated and renewed daily. And the ways in which we do so are as obvious as they are, often, neglected. Daily communication with the Father through prayer, regular immersion in the scriptures, faithful attendance at weekly meetings and in the temple, sincere and devoted service — these are the sorts of things that build and maintain our ties with the Lord.

When, as a bishop, I counseled with people whose lives had gone seriously astray, I routinely asked them whether they had been reading their scriptures, praying, attending the temple, participating regularly in weekly worship and seeking out opportunities to serve, and I wasn't surprised that they usually hadn't. There are, of course, exceptions, but they're just that: exceptions.

And, of course, the activities that I've just listed shouldn't be merely rote or perfunctory. We shouldn't pray without listening or read the scriptures just to check a chapter off of our to-do list, any more than we should engage in sham conversations with a spouse, thinking about other things while pretending to pay attention.

“Draw nigh to God,” says [James 4:8](#), “and he will draw nigh to you.”

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