

A metaphorical interpretation of the temple recommend interview questions

by Benjamin Knoll | Mar 7, 2017 | Featured, Interviews, Temple, Worthiness | 5 comments



“Borderlands” Mormons who wish to make temple worship part of their spiritual life sometimes struggle with the temple recommend interview process. This is often due to the disconnect they experience between a literal interpretation of the recommend questions and their own spiritual beliefs and practices. For many, they choose to forego a temple recommend in an effort to maintain their authenticity and integrity. Others, however, would like to maintain their recommend status but experience anxiety about the interview process. Given how frequently this topic comes up in Mormon internet discussions (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), e.g.), I suspect that there are many people in this situation.

Last month I discussed a paradigmatic interpretation of Mormonism that takes a more mystical and metaphorical approach (see also a Mormon Matters podcast on the topic). Here I offer a possible mystical/metaphorical interpretation of the temple recommend interview questions. (Again, this approach has been done by others, see [here](#), e.g.) One could argue that it would not be inconsistent or inappropriate to apply a metaphorical interpretation of the temple

recommend questions and to answer accordingly in the interview. This may help resolve some of the anxiety or perceived ethical dilemmas that “borderlands” Mormons might experience in the process.

I also invite readers to weigh in. How do they see this approach? Is this ethically sound or ethically suspect? Does this successfully resolve the perceived inconsistency? How else might mystical/metaphorical Mormons interpret the text of the interview questions?

1 Do you have faith in and a testimony of God the Eternal Father, His Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost?

Do you have the desire to cultivate hope in the reality of a Transcendent and Ultimate Absolute, which in the Christian tradition is often expressed as some form of “God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit”?

Alternatively, is the idea of a Transcendent Absolute (whatever that might mean to you) meaningful and to some degree operational in your life?

2 Do you have a testimony of the Atonement of Christ and of His role as Savior and Redeemer?

Is the metaphor of death and rebirth a meaningful one in your life? Do you strive to experience a death of former ways of being, knowing, perceiving, and acting and to meaningfully cultivate the continual rebirth of new ways of being, knowing, perceiving, and acting?

3 Do you have a testimony of the restoration of the gospel in these the latter days?

Do you find meaningful spiritual expression in the idea of God (or a Transcendent Absolute as you understand it) being at work in the community of your religious tribe?

Alternatively, can you find appreciation for some of the parallels between Joseph Smith’s spiritual work and those of other prominent or obscure mystics throughout world history?

4 Do you sustain the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as the Prophet, Seer, and Revelator and as the only person on the earth who possesses and is authorized to exercise all priesthood keys? Do you sustain members of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles as prophets, seers, and revelators? Do you sustain the other General Authorities and local authorities of the Church?

While recognizing that the concept of “authority” is ultimately a social construct, do you accept that the current leaders of the LDS Church are the institution’s legitimate leaders because they received their positions due to the existing rules and traditions of that institution?

5 Do you live the law of chastity?

Do you strive to maintain and demonstrate respect for the autonomy and agency of every person in your physical or emotional interactions with others, especially respecting the need for mutual consent in every interaction? Do you avoid any form of power-based coercion in your physical or emotional interactions? In romantic relationships, do you respect the explicit or implicit relationship expectations and boundaries of exclusivity?

6 Is there anything in your conduct relating to members of your family that is not in harmony with the teachings of the Church?

Do you strive to exemplify Christ-like (or simply divine) love in your interactions with your family, friends, and others?

7 Do you support, affiliate with, or agree with any group or individual whose teachings or practices are contrary to or oppose those accepted by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?

*Do you strive to avoid becoming a “stumbling block” to the efforts of others in their chosen spiritual paths and journeys? When working for truth, goodness, and justice in your religious, social, and political communities, do you strive to maintain a motive of love and seek to engage in a **constructive**, rather than **destructive**, way?*

8 Do you strive to keep the covenants you have made, to attend your sacrament and other meetings, and to keep your life in harmony with the laws and commandments of the gospel?

Do you strive to live an ethical life that increases the sum amount of justice, goodness, and grace in the world? Do you strive to balance individual with communal worship experiences?

9 Are you honest in your dealings with your fellowmen?

Do you strive to behave in an ethical way with your fellowmen and fellowwomen?

10 Are you a full-tithe payer?

Do you strive to use your time, talents, possessions, and energies in a way that contributes to causes of goodness and justice in the world? Do you consider your efforts in this regard to be a meaningful sacrifice?

11 Do you keep the Word of Wisdom?

Do you strive to keep your body free from addictions that decrease your agency and autonomy, whether they be physical or mental? Do you strive for moderation and to care for your body so that (among other things) it can be an effective conduit of spirituality?

12 Do you have financial or other obligations to a former spouse or children? If yes, are you current in meeting those obligations?

Do you have financial, ethical, physical, or emotional obligations to a former spouse or children? If yes, do you strive to meet those obligations?

13 If you have previously received your temple endowment:

- **Do you keep the covenants that you made in the temple?**
- **Do you wear the garment both night and day as instructed in the endowment and in accordance with the covenant you made in the temple?**

If you have previously participated in LDS temple ceremonies and rituals, do you find meaningful expression in the covenants that are part of those rituals as you personalize them to your life, either literally or metaphorically, through spiritual guidance and inspiration?

14 Have there been any sins or misdeeds in your life that should have been resolved with priesthood authorities but have not been?

Is there anything troubling you in your life that would like to seek help with from a spiritual friend or mentor?

15 Do you consider yourself worthy to enter the Lord's house and participate in temple ordinances?

Is participation in LDS temple rituals important to you personally or to maintain social harmony and love with your friends and family members? If so, will you ponder on the following quote by Christian mystic Thomas Merton?

*"Quit keeping score altogether and surrender yourself with all your sinfulness to God who sees neither the score nor the scorekeeper but only his child redeemed by Christ. ... God is asking me, the unworthy, to forget my unworthiness and that of my brothers, and dare to advance in the love which has redeemed and renewed us all in God's likeness. **And to laugh, after all at the preposterous ideas of 'worthiness'.**"*

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5 Comments



Clay Cook on March 7, 2017 at 7:51 am

I have been struggling with this since a came back to church after a 15 year hiatus. This is very helpful, thank you!

Reply



SisF on March 7, 2017 at 9:00 am

Once had an institute teacher and former Stake President tell me something similar. He interpreted the questions personally and said that he had been instructed to honor peoples personal interpretations even if they didn't align with his own.

Reply



Elsea on March 7, 2017 at 9:43 am

I sometimes feel a pull back to the idea of temple worship and community participation.

However, we have a legally married gay son that we support and love very much. The November 2015 policy was the final blow to our activity in the church and we do not know how to reconcile it with returning and participating again. Any ideas?

Reply



Bob Cooper on March 7, 2017 at 11:18 am

When the policy on same sex marriage was introduced I saw two problems with it. The first was corrected by a letter from the First Presidency the next week. The second has yet to be corrected. This problem is the Temple recommend question number seven that asks if support, affiliate with, or agree with any group or individual whose teachings or practices are contrary to or oppose those accepted by the Church. I do so does that mean I don't qualify for a recommend?

Shortly after the policy we had a visiting Seventy speak at stake conference and he said that if we have any questions about the policy we can get answers from our local leaders.

I talked to my Bishop and he wasn't able to answer my question.

I talked to my Stake President. He said he didn't care if I agreed with the policy or not and he said he would have no problem renewing my recommend.

Six months later he was true to his word.

My take on all this is that our leaders don't care what we think, they only care what we do.

The policy on same sex marriage, the principle upon which it is based, and any other related doctrine are not, in my opinion, authored or approved by God.

Reply



Tim Bone on March 7, 2017 at 1:52 pm

It's a matter of degree. I think these particular formulations go too far. Why would we turn gospel verities into metaphors? To dilute the temple recommend questions so anyone can make an argument via "metaphor" for his or her temple worthiness?

Take the first two recommend questions. There is nothing other than "the Christian tradition" that matters here. The only "way" is to see Jesus Christ as the sole ground for salvation. As there is no other way, no other Savior, no other Redeemer, no other reality; why remove Christ from this understanding? Why replace Him with an "idea" – or rather, with anyone's and everyone's "idea" – of a "Transcendent Absolute", whatever that can possibly mean. Is the Transcendent Absolute different than Jesus Christ? Have some agenda other than Christ's? A Buddhist could get a recommend under this proposed understanding.

Likewise, Question 3: It is irrelevant if someone feels that God (or the Transcendent Absolute) is at work in "their" religious tribe, as the only "tribe"

that matters here is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It is irrelevant if someone can find “parallels” between Joseph Smith and the prominent or obscure mystics of choice. What if he or she can’t? Is that what confirms Joseph’s credentials? Joseph Smith is not like them. None of them has his mission or Priesthood authority, which came by God’s personal and specific appointment.

Question 4: Is God’s authority a “social construct”? Obviously the leaders of the Church are the legitimate leaders because of structural procedures. I recognize that Pope Francis is his institution’s legitimate leader – so what? That isn’t what the question is asking. The question is not whether President of the Church is the “legitimate leader,” it is whether you accept this legitimate leader as the only person on Planet Earth who possesses all Priesthood keys Christ has given for salvation. This isn’t a metaphor for anything.

Question 5: Why the need for ambiguity here? We all know what the law of chastity is: no sexual relations outside of marriage (and legal and lawful marriage at that, not “Well, I know in my heart we are married or as good as”). And we all know the world has wished this law away. Mutual consent outside of marriage is irrelevant. How does one live the law of chastity “metaphorically?”

Question 14: And again. The question doesn’t provide an option to replace Priesthood authorities with the spiritual mentor of your choice.

Thus, all that seems necessary for a temple recommend under a “metaphorical” understanding is to consider the questions as ambiguous, as a spacious expanse wherein one’s own interpretation and comfortable nook can always be found. It looks to me as though an individual’s understanding of a Transcendent Absolute is able to trump any and all of the recommend questions.

Reply

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