



Liberals, Doctrine, & Apologetics at Church | An Interview with Blair Hodges

November 20, 2021

00:00:05 - 00:05:04

We live in a world plagued by pornography and people are looking for help. When an individual struggles with pornography, they often turn to their church leader for that help. How does a leader help a person overcome the shame of this issue and start seeing positive progress? How can a leader help youth to open up about struggles with pornography? What are some lasting proven tactics that actually make a difference? In order to help leading saints has created the liberating saints library with more than 20 presentations featuring individuals who have a unique perspective or expertise around this topic. Three of those most popular sessions are available to watch now, simply text the word lead to four 747 four 7 to start watching now or visit leading-saints.org/liberating. Leading saints is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping Latter day Saints be better prepared to lead. And we do that through content creation, like this podcast, which we hope useful subscribe to. We also have a website at leading-saints.org with thousands of incredible articles all about leadership in the context of being a latter day saint. We host virtual summits, live events, and also have a weekly newsletter to keep you up to date on all things happening with leading saints. Visit leading-saints.org for more information. Today I am sitting down through the powers of the Internet with a Blair Hodges. How are you Blair? I'm great. Good to be here. Yeah, I'm glad we finally got this worked out. Some of these interviews, there's some opposition we have to push through from time to time with aligning schedules and whatnot. But many people may recognize your name and voice

from the Maxwell institute podcast, which you were the host for many years. But recently have moved on to your own podcast called fireside with Blair Hodges. And how would you describe, I mean, what's your how is your podcast journey been in general? Well, it actually started out back at fairer fair Mormon, which I think had several name changes. I don't know. Remember what it was when I started there, but fair. And at the time, John delin's podcast was taking off Mormon stories. He was really popular. And I felt like there was a lot of hunger out there for audio content talking about issues talking about difficult issues. And that was really the only Mormon show or latter day saint show on the market. And so I proposed a fair to do a podcast there. I was studying journalism at the time at the university of Utah. And so I was taking classes in audio journalism and thought, this would be a good opportunity to get some professional skills, but also to serve my religious community. And so fair, let me start that show. And I think I did about ten episodes there before I went to grad school and had to take a break. But left enough of an impression on people that the max wants to track me down when I was finishing up my master's degree and invited me to come and work there and start a show there. So that's where the max will institute podcast began and I did that for 8 years and got to interview all kinds of incredible scholars of religion from our tradition and from all sorts of different traditions. Yeah. And the Maxwell institute correct me if I'm wrong is a part of Brigham young university. And so were you were you employed by them to do the podcast or how did that work? Yeah, well, the position was a communications position, so it included the podcast, but it included a lot more than that. Was it bringing on university? So yeah, it's a church institution. I worked for the church for those 8 years, and yeah, nice. And how would you describe your own personal like faith development where you raised in the church and how did your conviction of the gospel progress? I was raised in the church. My parents are both members and I kind of typical group here in Utah and served a mission in Wisconsin.

00:05:04 - 00:10:07

And during my mission, I got really interested in reading a lot. And I read through the machinery library, so many times that finally I went to my mission president and said, hey, you know, I've read Jesus the Christ 5 times. Can I branch out? I'm also doing my scripture study, can I branch out and my mission president was a great man and encouraged me to do that. I started reading pretty widely, I read the Quran and I read a bunch of C. S. Lewis and other things like that. And started meeting with people of other faiths, not just to teach them, but also to learn. I quickly found that if I was just there to kind of send information at them, it was less effective than if I understood where they were coming from. And starting from a base of common belief in order to do that, I had to listen, and I had to learn. And so I made a point to attend as many different religious meetings from different religious groups that I could as a missionary. And just pan. It just really lit my little fire in me and when I got home, that's how I connected up with Ferris saw that they were intellectually driven in a way that wanted to understand our faith intellectually and

respond to criticisms and I had gone through a lot of those questions myself. And so I went through that apologetic path and then got connected with religious studies, which is a little bit different. We can talk about that a little bit later on, but that's kind of my path was through regular church membership, missionary work, connecting with other traditions, defending my own faith, and then learning more about my own faith and other faiths. Yeah. And then how did that impact your education journey when you got home? Yeah, so I wanted to do journalism. I've always liked to write and I thought I would just be a regular journalist. But the more conversations I got into about religion, the more interested I became in religious studies and actually had an opportunity as an undergraduate. When I finished my bachelor's degree to join Terrell Gibbons at the Maxwell Institute for a summer seminar that they were doing, Richard Bushman, the biography of Joseph Smith started these a number of years ago. And this is where they take a number of students together during the summer and they all get together and read a bunch of primary sources. We go back in the archives and read a bunch of early literature written by Latter-day Saints, and then we write papers about what we find. And under the tutelage of these great Latter-day Saint scholars and Terrell Gibbons led my seminar. And I still have really some really great friends from that seminar. And I had just finished my bachelor's and I realized I want to do a religious studies. I want to actually continue to do this. And so I applied for graduate schools around the country. It got accepted into Georgetown University and moved out there and did their religious studies degree. Nice. And so where do you see your career going at this point? Well, at this point, so I spent 8 years I had a degree in communications and religious studies. And so the max wants to do it was a great fit for that. I was a communications specialist with a religious studies background. And so I was able to kind of bridge a divide between scholars and more general public and while I was there, I also did graphic design and photography and all kind of book promotion. And I edited the Living Faith series. All kinds of things. And I really loved it. Working there for 8 years over time, it can be difficult to work for the church sometimes for me. I'm kind of a more liberal member of the church and so there are pressures there regarding that and over time I just felt like, you know, I want to try something new. I was also at my professional ceiling there. I was the communication specialist for the institute, but didn't really want to go higher up at BYU into the communications Department for the whole university. And so I just started looking around and found a nonprofit communications director job. So I actually worked in Salt Lake City now at a nonprofit as a communications director. That's my day job. We work on things like homelessness and mental illness and addiction. And then I started my own podcast because I want to stay connected to the academy and to thoughtful Latter-day Saints and thoughtful people who were Latter-day Saints and people who never were Latter-day Saints, but talking about religion. And so that's why I started my new podcast and I don't have to get paid for it. I don't have to worry about it. It's actually kind of nice to do it as not a paid job. Yeah. So you mentioned you're more liberal Latter-day Saint. What does that look like? Because obviously we have typically seen as a very conservative church. I think most Christian religions are seem more conservatively. But what do you mean by a more liberal Latter-day Saint than how is that impacted just your existence as a Latter-day Saint in this culture? Sure, so over time, I've kind of made a transition from a typical kind of American white male Latter-day Saint who believes in certain things about America and its destiny or about how politics should work.

00:10:08 - 00:15:01

The role of government issues like that that I just tend to see differently than a lot of church members in the United States anyways. I vote Democrat, for example, I don't know a lot of Democrat Latter day Saints in my own wards. I haven't known a lot. So it's kind of a minority position. I see things differently from the church on certain issues. LGBT issues, gender and sexuality issues. So I don't always feel in my heart that I can line up with particular church teachings. And so, you know, that can be tricky. And when I worked at BYU, it was actually there was so much happening there that was wonderful and that I felt really good about that. That I'm really proud of the work I was able to accomplish there and worked hard to represent the church as a church employee. I recognize when you work for a place certain expectations that you need and I worked hard to meet those and that's what I mean when I say liberal is just disagreeing on certain issues and yeah. And this is an interesting concept because I think a lot of leaders obviously the leadership leadership is generally more orthodoxy. I think a lot of them want to find a place for those that are maybe more liberal to feel comfortable at church to feel like that you're part of that community and whatnot. Has that ever been a friction point for you? Has it come to a point of wondering if you really have a place in this community or oh, sure. You know, I've had some I've had some great bishops and other bishops that were really difficult for me. In the same within the same word. When we first moved back to Salt Lake from grad school, had an incredible bishop. Jordan Howe really thoughtful guy I think when you have a leaders have bookworms in their awards nerdy there's always a guy in Sunday school who speaks Hebrew, right? Exactly. Like I recognize we're kind of weird and so I try to just kind of blend into the congregation, but for this particular bishop, he understood. I felt free to talk with him about some of the things that I believed and I never felt pressured by him or judged by him. Another bishop just had a lot of problems with anybody who had any kind of disagreement with any particular thing that he believed. And that was difficult. That was difficult. So there's a lot that leaders can do to promote a climate of welcome. And I know for some, it's a really hard needle to thread. They feel like they need to uphold certain doctrines or gatekeep to keep things clear to keep things above board and so forth, I think that the church would be a healthier place if we had more room for some disagreement. And an honored honored honorable in honest disagreements that church members have between each other and that's a process. So I'm curious just from your experience, some specific things leaders could do, because I think sometimes it's the feeling of like, well, you know, I'm glad Blair's in our war. I hope he comes to the chili cook off. Let's not get him in front of the Sunday school class. As a teacher, type thing. But when in reality, that's probably where you would shine and because you're well read and have a lot of sources and whatnot that you can and perspectives from other religions or whatever it is that you could really create a well rounded thoughtful discussion or lesson there. But I mean, do you feel like you're alienated from some of those some of those colleagues of influence or colleagues of teaching or what that leader do? Sure, I don't expect personally to be

like, I'm not going to be a bishopric president. It's just not in my I don't have the I don't have the background for that. But I have taught Sunday school. It's my favorite calling within the same word. I had one bishop who wanted me to teach Sunday school more than anything else. And then I had another bishop who didn't want me to teach Sunday school at all. And now I'm an award where I do teach Sunday school. They love it. And I love it and it's a really good situation. So it does depend on the leader. In terms of what leaders can do, it's really difficult because I understand the position that leaders are in if they feel like someone is using their calling as a platform. I think that could be a sort of a kind of unrighteous dominion that a teacher could exercise. One of the things I try to do in my classes is provide a lot of space for different perspectives, including divs that I personally disagree with.

00:15:03 - 00:20:03

And to include voices in lessons in a way that lets everybody feel like they can add to the conversation and not be shouted down maybe not be agreed with either, and that's a difficult thing to cultivate. It takes time. I don't have any secret tips for bishops other than just to continue to work with people. I will say this, though, there's a phenomenon that happens in words where someone in the world will become what will be ruffled by something. Let's say, and I've seen this, I was Sunday school president. So I dealt with this with some of my other teachers that I had called into their callings. Someone would go to the bishop and say, sister so and so said this in her lesson and I don't think that's right, I think this is a big problem. Kind of a little bit of tattletale culture. And it's really difficult when a bishop contacts a teacher as though they've done something wrong. I'm of the view that if someone has a complaint or a difference of opinion, they need to work on addressing it with the person that they're disagreeing with. The scriptures talk about if a brother offends you take them aside and talk to them, right? And so I think that bishops and relief society presidents and others can do a lot to address this kind of tattletale culture. So if someone comes to a leader and says, oh, brother, so and so said this in a lesson to say, oh, well, how did you feel about that? Well, what's your view on that? Oh, that's interesting. Did you share that with the teacher? Oh, would you like to? That's going to be a better approach than having a really awkward meeting with a teacher. And I've had a few of those in the past and it never feels good. It feels invasive and awkward. And it feels unfair. There's an imbalance of power there. The bishop has this has a lot of authority and the teachers in a vulnerable position. So although I'm sympathetic to members who feel like something is said that's harmful, let's say there's someone with a gay child in a ward and something is said about people who are gay, that really hurts that parent. And they go to the bishop and say, you know, this teacher said this, it was really it really hurt. I would hope the same thing that the bishop would be able to say, oh, yeah, hey, that's really rough. Can we would you like to talk about that more? Can we maybe meet with the teacher? Can we and foster the idea that you know what? It's actually okay to disagree on this stuff. That's actually okay. We don't need

everybody to repeat the same thing. So it can happen on wherever on the sort of political whatever you want to call it spectrum people fall on. This tattletale culture can be can be turned around into a culture of connection. That's the goal rather than having someone make a complaint and then have the bishops or say, well, don't do that. But rather to get together and talk about it or to encourage that person to address it with the teacher rather than just tattling. And there's sort of this principles office dynamic that can serve as real quick. And no matter how you position that or how you call them in or there's always that feeling of like you've done something wrong and I'm here to correct you. And when in reality, there's maybe some other open more open communication or encouraging members to discuss amongst themselves or approach each other rather than going to the principal to handle it and come down with a hammer, right? Yeah, I think that's right. And I'm curious your thoughts on this concept of teaching doctor. I think generally speaking, I think most members would agree in Sunday school and church. The hope is that doctrine is taught and understood and elder packer mentioned as far as the power of teaching doctor and it was more powerful than in changing behaviors in the study of behaviors. Obviously I'm poorly paraphrasing that. But no, that's word for word. But the point being is like, sometimes we have this feeling like, oh, well, if brother just stands up there and says something that I don't think is right, we gotta make sure that that's cleared up because there are sort of poison in the well. What if he says that and then ten other members think that? And then we perpetuate this false doctor. And when in reality, I don't think a lot of members just sort of grasp as far as what doctor and is and when it's taught when it isn't, and is that the only reason we go to Sunday school is to rehearse doctrinal principles and clarify those things. Or is there an invitation maybe explore different thoughts and then how they overlay it on our current social experience or our day to today lives or politics or whatever it is? How do these principles come into our life? So what are your thoughts as far as like, what is doctor and then like, what's the purpose of that doctor being taught in church? Okay, I'm going to answer this in a roundabout way, but I'm going to get to that one as doctor in question.

00:20:04 - 00:25:03

This is where comparative religion is really helpful. So let's think about how our Sunday school actually works. So if you're let's say you've never been to one and you visit one, and you go and sit down and you see, like, how a teacher usually addresses the class. What role the class is supposed to play? Well, let's compare that to Catholicism where they have catechism, which is a kind of class where students go and they receive information from a teacher and they repeat it back and things are pretty scripted out. There are particular questions and there are proper answers to those questions in order to prepare for confirmation in the Catholic Church. You go through these catechism classes, kind of like our missionary discussions. But it's pretty formulaic. It's to get things straight. It's to be on the same page, even though Catholicism is a very diverse even more diverse than latter day saint, religious tradition based on its age. But

there's this expectation of formula. And I think sometimes latter day Sunday schools fall into that, even though we're not trying to. There are particular questions that get asked every four years when we hit a particular scripture. In particular answers that are given pretty much every year. You can kind of count on a catechism type of an approach fairly regularly, I think in the church. Now, compare that to quakers. Quakers are a religious group where they would all sit together in a room, and nobody in particular leads the discussion. They sit in quiet and then when someone is moved upon by the spirit that will stand up and speak and say, kind of what's on their mind a little mini fast and testimony meeting type of the situation. And anybody can get up and say what's in their heart and talk about what they're feeling or what they believe. And there can be differences of opinion and they're not all trying necessarily to get to the same exact answer. They're trying to get to the same feeling in the same connection. So those are kind of two sides of two ends of a spectrum. On the one hand, it's very formulaic. On the other hand, it's very open. And I think Latter day Saints can go back and forth across that spectrum of things. And when we think about in our tradition what doctrine is, we tend to think of doctor and I think as true things. True official things is what doctrine is. And there's you'll hear church leaders talk about the pure doctrine pure doctrine. And for me, I'm skeptical of the idea of pure doctrine and the reason comes from our scripture. This is in the doctrine and covenants where God says I speak to my servants, according to their understanding, I speak in their language and language itself has so much baggage and so many so much backstory that any time we're trying to express eternal truths in human language, we're already mingling it. Yeah. And there's that famous phrase about the philosophies of men being mingled with scripture. I actually think I actually think that's inescapable. It's sort of like in the Bible where Satan says, you won't die, you'll be as the gods, knowing good and evil. He's kind of telling them the truth there. They will, in a sense, I think it's the same thing with this philosophies of men in the description, which is we're always mingling stuff. That doesn't mean that it's not true. That just means we have to be humble and open to further light and knowledge. So whenever we're talking about our doctor always already putting it into our language and into our concepts and our categories in our backgrounds in our histories. And we're always mixing it that way. And that makes it accessible and understandable to us. That's what makes us able to talk about it at all. And that's why it's so important to have many different voices talking because different experiences, different backgrounds, different races, different men and women. And everything can bring different truths in different views to a doctoral conversation. So we have official teachings of the church. And I think they're pretty clear and they're pretty set out. But there's also a lot that we don't have nailed down exactly. Just one example would be like, what's our doctrine of the afterlife? Well, we believe families can be together forever. We believe that there are certain ordinances that people will undergo to affirm their family relationships throughout eternity through God's grace through the atonement of Christ. But what does that really look like? And president oaks in a recent general conference got up and basically said that he doesn't really know exactly what that's going to look like. There are questions about different ceiling configurations, for example, between women and men. And he basically said, you know, there's actually quite a bit we don't know about the logistics here. So we have official doctrines about the afterlife, what it looks like. But there's also a lot of space about things that we don't have a complete grasp of. And that keeps us open. We have an article of faith that says we expect many great and important things

pertain to the kingdom of God to yet be revealed. And so when we think of our doctrine sometimes we get rigid and think that we've got it all nailed down.

00:25:03 - 00:30:02

And I just tend to think that we're safer when we are a bit more humble about that. And a bit more open to different perspectives. So that's a long way of answering the question about official doctrine and Alzheimer's school. And I appreciate the concept you know as far as this mingling with scriptures that can be turned into a Trump card in our cultures like sounds like this teacher was doing a lot of philosophy as a man mingled with their scriptures. And to realize that, as mortals, that's almost impossible to escape mealing. And as I'm sitting in a class, and I hear somebody say something or even the teacher says something and I think I don't think that's entirely true how he framed that. But I'm going to have patience with that as their mingling, because I do a lot of mingling too, but it's in that mingle and where I find a deeper faith in a more complete framework to maybe see the gospel to actually apply my behavior in life through the gospel rather than saying, I got the formula and we've got to make sure we don't venture off from this formula. We have to we can't Google it with anything else. But in reality, there's nothing. It's almost impossible to avoid. And that's okay. Yeah, think about it in terms of rigidity, like a rigid thing versus a durable thing. When we think we've got everything locked down, we can become brittle. I've seen it happen a lot where someone is very sure about certain things. Everything's got to be a certain way. And then a policy will change or a general authority will offer a different view of a doctrine. And usually our leaders don't explicitly say that they're kind of correcting something from the past. They just sort of do it without pointing out that they're doing it. But it happens. And I've seen that be really hard for some people and kind of break them. And that's because there's no flexibility there. They think that that rigidity is strength. But I would rather have something durable, something durable that's that can bend with a little bit of pressure that can withstand change. And can withstand new information. So I think it's a strength to be able to hold space for uncertainty and to let go of the need to be certain about everything. Yeah. And, you know, it takes my mind to, I was serving as bishop every four or 5 years we got to go to this meeting with an apostle and elder renland was there. And he told a story about a question that was asked to elder bednar about something that Joseph F Smith had said. And it was interesting to hear that elder bennard just frankly said, well, that's because Joseph F Smith was wrong about that component. It was almost like this record scratch moment. What did you say? It just realizing that even our leaders are sort of they're exploring different concepts and over time as whether it's an individual apostle or leader, maybe it will correct that with how he sees things or if it's even even better when the joint body of the brother and come together and really create a correction there. But just to see that, there's some ebbs and flows along, even the faith and perspectives of our leaders over decades of time. Yeah, that reminds me of, I have a really good example of that that happened on my mission. When I was

speaking of rigidity, I was, I include myself in this. And here's the story. As a missionaries, I said, I got to read a ton of stuff. And I started reading a bunch of general authorities. I read all of Joseph feelings miss answers to gospel questions and Bruce armaments Mormon doctrine. I was reading all of these things. About halfway through my mission I was assigned a new companion. So I was going to be his trainer and first day we're talking about, hey, so what do you do? And he said, oh, I came from BYU. I'm studying epidemiology. Which I assume he's right now at this time. Thank you for studying epidemiology. Desperately needed. But he told me, yeah, so I said, what have you done so far? I talked about his biology classes, and I said, oh, great. So this is a BYU. Did they debunk evolution? Just amazingly. And he kind of said, well, and I could tell you instantly was trying to be Ginger with me. It was just like, well, yeah, so no. No, we just had regular classes that talked about evolution. And I said, what? And he said, yeah, and I said, wait a minute. They're teaching evolution at BYU? And he says, oh yeah, yeah, of course. You know, it's a very sound scientific principle. It's the basis of modern medicines, the basis going on. And I said, that's not possible. And I said, you understand that the church says evolution is false. And he said, well, you know, some leaders said that, but the church doesn't, that's not an official teaching now. And I said, yeah, it is. Look, and I went and got my books. I had just been reading. Joseph feeling Smith saying how basically evolution wasn't just wrong.

00:30:03 - 00:35:03

It was evil. The idea of it was atheistic and terrible. And I'm showing him this stuff trying. And I'm like, look, look, and trying to make him read stuff. And he was really patient with me. He didn't get he didn't get upset. He didn't tell me to shut up. But he also didn't try to pretend like he was agreeing either. He just said, look, I have a different view. I understand. I'm not trying to change your mind about that. I'm just telling you, this is what I'm learning in school. This is what I'm learning at BYU. I believe these things. I don't think they contradict gospel principles. But I'm not trying to you're fine. And he gave me a lot of space and it kind of blew my mind. I think that's the first time I can remember, that is the first time I can remember seeing a member of the church just say that a profit was wrong about something. It was just wrong about something. And to do it in a way that maintained love and fidelity, obviously, it's our tradition. He was a missionary. So he was out spreading the gospel message. So clearly, for him, somehow, it worked for him to say that a profit could be wrong about something, but still be a faithful member of the church. Blew my mind. And I think him giving me that space, not trying to convert me, but also not really giving ground either on something that he believed was made a big impact on me. That was the kind of approach. I didn't need an argument. I didn't need him to get, you know. I would have dug in further. Instead, he just planted this seed that later on, you know, I get home and I one of the first college classes I took when I got home was anthropology in the first section was on human evolution through the ages and I think it would have troubled my faith. If I hadn't had

someone that I'd seen, get through this stuff and find out that it was actually okay. And so he was a great example to me. Awesome. Larry, obviously, completely avoided our planned outline here, but I was fascinated by the discussion on the list. So let's pivot into as we were talking about recording in every interview and having a discussion I was curious about just the overall landscape of apologetics. And you've been in many of these circles, everything from fair to maximal institute and then talking old school stuff like farms. And then we have sunstone and dialog and BYU studies. And as a late leader, sometimes it feels like, you know, those are such intellectual crowds, academic crowds that myself, I don't classify myself as an academic. It's most intimidating to wait into those waters. But then you have somebody in your ward who's in this dark night of the soul faith crisis, and you want to get them resources and help. And, you know, I think fair does a good job of making their articles and whatnot generally available and as good resources. And so maybe a bishop may push somebody that way or at least cited president may say, oh, well, definitely check out the Maxwell institute. Here's 5 episodes that Blair did that are fantastic or whatnot. So sometimes it's hard to really understand what are these resources and should we be skeptical of some or should we be fully embracing or then we get back into this, the mingling concept? What are these organizations mingling into some of their articles or resources what not? So help paint the picture as far as this apologetic world that's out there that is, I would say overall helping the church and bringing scholarship to the table and understanding these things. But where should we begin with this discussion? Okay. So I mean we can begin with a very basic like the word apologetics itself. A lot of church members may not even have heard this word. Apologetics, apologia comes from a Greek word that means a defense. And it's found in the New Testament where Paul is saying, encouraging Christians to be prepared to give a defense for the hope that is in them. To be able to give reason for the hope. To be able to reason about it to give reasons why they have faith. So it's not just a blind kind of faith or rather a faith that is without any kind of foundation, like nonsense or gobbledygook. And so apologetics happens whenever someone defends a position. So you could defend defending the idea of evolution, for example, you could kind of see that as apologetics in the sense that it's a reason to defensive a position of a theory. And so religious apologetics is geared toward helping people who are having doubts or questions about their faith and it's a way to respond to those. So someone I remember is a seminary student in high school, Nifa mentioned something about snow.

00:35:05 - 00:40:00

In second, fight, it's a metaphor. And I was like, wait a minute, was there snow in the, where the knee fights were at? That seems like that, is that a mistake? And I talked to so many teacher and he didn't freak out. He was just like, oh wow, you're a really close reader. That's awesome. Let's check that verse out. And he looked at it and sure enough nifa was quoting Isaiah, and if I remember correctly. And I thought, oh, okay, so this is coming from a different place in the Bible,

et cetera anyway. He gave me an answer. He had an answer ready, and he was kind about it and interested that I was interested. Those two things together I think are really crucial. The attitude behind apologetics and the content of the apologetics. And I think we have to pay attention to both of those things. Getting a lay of the land for Latter day Saints. There's a lot of different organizations and groups and publications that are made, not by the church institution itself, but by church members or former church members that are answering criticisms or defending particular positions. And bishops are in a tough spot. It's not possible to keep up with. I've never been able to. It was my job to work in this field and I couldn't keep up with all of them. So I don't think anyone should be expected to do that. But I do think it's helpful to ask a couple of questions of any particular entity. For example, how close to the institution, how close to the official church is any given outlet. And I'll mention some examples here. But how close to it? So you have the maximal institute at BYU. It's not in the church history department. It's not part of correlation. It doesn't create Sunday school. At BYU, so they're expected to uphold the standards and beliefs and doctrines of the church. But they're a little bit of a remove, so you might see a little bit more wide ranging thought there. You will see more wide ranging thought there. But they're pretty close to the church. We see this with their religious study center at BYU. Another place that publishes books on latter decent history and thought. We see this with BYU studies coming out of BYU. So that's pretty close. Then you have a group like the interpreter, which is a journal that publishes stuff on scripture and it formally formally associated with farms. Part of that farms approach of looking in the ancient world and finding interesting parallels between the ancient world and Joseph Smith revealed scripture, and so on and so forth. And isn't around anymore? Or did it morph into? So really quickly, really quickly farms wasn't independent entity. And BYU went and brought them in and said, we'd actually like to make a part of the university. Will you come in to be part of the university? So they did. And it was combined with several other projects at BYU. There was an ancient text initiative at BYU that they were combined with and some other things. And it became the Nile Maxwell institute. The max wants to was a combination of farms and some other things in farms itself dissolved in a way. It was absorbed into the maxillo institute. Excuse me, the maximum institute has a Willis center for book of Mormon studies, and that was kind of the inheritor of the farms that part yes. But then the maximal institute changed directors not change directors, but changed direction away from some of that type of apologetic toward new modes of apologetics. And that's when interpreter was founded was to continue in this other vein of things. And so and interpreter is not part of nerva has been a part of BYU, right? Correct, yeah. They're an independent entity. So you have them, same with book of Mormon central, which is also kind of an offshoot of the old farms. This is John Welch, who the man who discovered chiasmus in the book of Mormon the special literary formula. Book of Mormon central. And they're really a place kind of an outlet that gathers a bunch of the apologetic material and scholarly material about Mormons latter day saint scripture and puts it up online and kind of turns it into sound bites and stuff. Basically repackaging it for younger generations and things like that. So a book of Mormon central is one. And then you have groups like faith matters. Which is an independent entity. People say that that falls more on sort of on the open minded end of the spectrum, they have a lot of different voices that they bring in their podcasts and they publish books. Then you have groups that have been around a long time like dialog and sunstone. And if you have members in your ward that read dialog and sunstone, they're probably more progressive members of the church. They

might disagree with the church social matters, but dialog and sunstone have long been an outlet of really interesting Mormon thought. And it really depends on any given article.

00:40:01 - 00:45:09

Same with farms, any of this stuff. There's no surefire stamp of approval that can be put on any of these entities. Everything that they produce really needs to be evaluated according to its own merits and according to how good it is. So you have dialog in sunstone, you have the latter day saint women project, which is an excellent website with resources for people who want to include more voices of women in their lessons and things. And that's a fantastic project. You have fair, as I mentioned. Then you have on the more conservative end of things, you have the firm foundation in the book of Mormon archeological project. And these groups are much more American, patriot, homeschooling, evolution is bad, these so they're sort of more on the conservative end of the political spectrum. But they're also apologetic outfits. They have there's a lot of warfare that goes on between these groups, they have strong opinions about where the book of Mormon took place or what the role of Columbus was or these type of things. So all across this spectrum, you wonder, how close are these institutions? Most of them that I've mentioned here aren't very close to it at all. You also want to look at what the background of the people involved are. In a place like the maximal institute, these are people with degrees in religion. They've studied in the academy. They have credentials. They're versus a place like fair, which is mostly volunteers from all kinds of different backgrounds. And most of them not trained in religious studies or something like that. It's a lot more open collaborative and amateur. But I will say that in the worst sense of that term, I say that in the term of these people aren't doing that for a living. And so yeah, you want to know. Who's doing it? And then the question that I think a lot of leaders want to know is how orthodox are they? How heterodox are they? How close are they to acceptable latter day saint belief? But that gets back to my original or my earlier comments about making space for differences in making people feel welcome regardless of particular disagreements on particular things. So I think, as I mentioned, the attitude and the spirit of the apologetic is just as important as the content of it. I really firmly believe that. In fact, I believe that if apologetics aren't fundamentally grounded in charity in the charity of Christ that they aren't apologetics at all, even if they're trying to defend the church. Because without that spirit of charity without that, then you're not teaching with what the doctrine and covenants calls the spirit of truth. It's a great section that says, when you're teaching, are you teaching by the spirit of truth? Or by some other way, when you're teaching truth or you're teaching by the spirit of truth. So it recognizes that there are ways to teach true things in untrue ways. Whether it be through coercion, whether it be through intimidation, mockery, ridicule, anger, division, divisiveness, contention. There are ways to teach true things in untrue ways without the spirit of truth. And so the apologetic approach itself has to embody that that spirit of charity or it's not true apologetics. And that can be found on both ends of the spectrum of these resources. Even

on the maybe the more conservative side, you have this tone of mocking those who are in disagreement with the church at times. And I don't think that they try and filter those things out. I would assume they don't want generally want that to be their message and then on the other side of this mockery of the art orthodox at times. I can't believe with all this. All this evidence, you're still believing, are you still hold on to this principle, right? So hopefully across the spectrum, you're going to find good scholarship that isn't necessarily just putting forth ideas and perspectives and facts or whatever it is without this tone of dismissal of maybe the other side of the spectrum. Yeah, I think that's right. In fact, this is where this is where we could take a page from some critics of the church. Where they're able to show empathy or where they show empathy where they show kindness, where they show openness. That kind of speaks to that spirit of truth. Now, the particular things they're saying may not be true, but the way they're saying it includes some validation, emotional validation that people really need when they feel vulnerable or when they feel doubtful or whatever. And so our apologetics are defensive the church has to embody that exact kind of welcome empathy. And giving people the space to differ if it comes down to it, not making ultimatums for people that there are so many other things that we can embrace together that we don't have to have every single thing to be part of this community.

00:45:09 - 00:50:01

We don't have to be agreed on every single thing. That's toxic. The other thing is, as you said, it's not that there's no good all good or all bad entities out here. Nobody believes that they're a villain. Everybody's trying to do something that they believe is I don't think I couldn't point to anybody and say, oh, they know that what they're doing is bullcrap. I think everybody pretty much believes what they're doing. And even the same entity like, I'll give the pharmacist a great example of this. Some of the old farm stuff is pretty bad. It's aggressive. It's snarky. It's sarcastic, it's mean. And but other and you'll see critics of the church bring this up. Farms is mean. Or even fair, right? Fares mean, and you can point to stuff where they have been. But you can also point to stuff where they've done some excellent things. They've done some things that really could help. That are really useful today. Nobody's all good or all bad. I can't point to any entity that I would say I haven't been able to learn something from a particular entity. So what really matters to me is what's propelling it? What's behind it? Where's that charity? Yeah, and really approaching these all these organizations, regardless of where you are on the spectrum of just saying, I'm probably going to run into things I deeply disagree with. And that's okay, the point isn't that we're trying to get everybody on the same agreement. But the point is to explore these different dynamics in our faith tradition, whether it's doctor in her history or whatever it is. And just being open minded to the fact that, you know, that I completely disagree with that article, but it's actually okay that that article was published because it's pushing us along and hopefully we're finding deeper unity as we shared diverse opinions and who among

us hasn't changed their mind about something. There are things I've written or produced that I fundamentally disagree with now. So if I confront the fact that I have to argue with myself sometimes, then I have to allow other people that same space of saying, hey, you know, we can actually disagree and that doesn't make us bad. This is the most important thing. I think leaders can do is make space, make welcoming space for people that they can bring, they can have their questions. They can have their disagreements. They're reckoning with those. They're grappling with those, and we don't have to fix it all right now, we love them for who they are. We want them to be here because of all this other great stuff too. And there's all this other stuff that we're together on, and that's what matters is finding that common ground, even when we disagree about really big things. And so anyone who's had to change their mind about something themselves should be able to recognize that they still could be wrong about more things that so they need to for humility's sake and for charity's sake, give space to other people. And when leaders do it, it can change the dynamic of an entire ward. If the leader has an opportunity to demonstrate this in a Sunday school class, how incredible I remember one lesson where two I wasn't teaching it. I was in the congregation in two people were disagreeing about something and the bishop raised their hand and said, hey, I actually think I'm not sure which of you is correct. This is really interesting. And just sort of showed as the leader that that was okay. And other people in that room who were feeling, I guarantee there are other people in that room who are feeling embattled or feeling defensive and feeling like they couldn't say anything to see the bishops speak up and say, oh hey, yeah, that's interesting. Or to see us relief society presidents speak up and offer a different opinion. That helps change the climate of the ward. You're helping to demonstrate that charity belongs there. Yeah. And with that charity, I'm just thinking with these different resources and organizations. You know, I've rolled my eyes many times on stone or dialog just for my more orthodox conservative perspective. But it's easy to fall in the trap like, oh, well, I saw this article once they wrote, and it was completely off base. And so I'm going to dismiss the organization completely. But to be more open to saying, you know, they have a place in our cultural discussion as we try and find deeper truth in perspective. And, you know, there's some things there were some things written in dialog in the 60s and 70s that I don't know if it's that or 70s or 80s that the orthodox members completely disagreed with then, but now is sort of embraced as more sound doctrine. That's now published by the church at the very end of the press.

00:50:03 - 00:55:07

Yeah. So just being open to the reality that we can't just dismiss them because of some articles that we completely disagree with, but just realize these are people that they don't see themselves as a villain like you said, but they're trying to find deeper perspective and knowledge there. And recognizing true that there are biases in all of these organizations. So it's not like these are infallible people that are running these things and publishing and editing this content.

But it's messy, right? But nonetheless, we shouldn't dismiss. It's easy to. I get it because sometimes we need shortcuts. There's so much stuff we do need shortcuts. There are things that I'm less likely to read. A certain publisher or certain whatever, I'm less likely to read it based on experience and just like their standards aren't academic standards aren't great or whatever. So I get it. I get the shortcuts. But if somebody comes to me with that book and is interested in it, the worst thing I could do is be dismissive and jerky about it. But rather to try to make a connection with them. This is what I want to say about all of this apologetic stuff. When we talk about people leaving the church, that's kind of the language we use. They leave the church. They become anti Mormon, whatever we want to say. There's a word that I've really been thinking about for years and the word is disaffection. And I've noticed this working at BYU, seeing people become disaffected with the church and you look at the root of that affection affection love. They feel they feel they come to feel unloved, they come to feel disconnected from a spirit of love. They're disaffected from the church. It's a relationship thing. It's about feelings. That's what's at the root of all of this. And we'll come up with intellectual reasons, people will say I came to think Joseph Smith was a liar, or I came to I didn't like polygamy or whatever, the issue may be, but behind that is almost always a disconnection from a feeling of being loved in a community. And feeling squeezed out as Patrick mason talks about in his planted book. And so that's what we always need to address people with doubts people with questions. People that seem to differ with us politically or whatever, we need to remember that we're trying to build affection, edification and affection is what we're going for here, and that when people disconnect from our religious community, that's why they're leaving. They don't feel welcome. That's the best bottom line. Yeah. Now, as we talk about, you know, these different resources. All these ones that you talked about, there's some type of academic standard that they're all trying to live up to. Would you say that's correct? And I don't want to, you know, as we're talking about things about, don't just dismiss these these perspectives and thoughts as we go through this. I don't want to necessarily put that on all existing platforms in the World Wide Web related to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Because I loved your perspective on this. I've had individuals asking about certain platforms that aren't academic platforms. They're similar to I don't consider leading saints and academic platform or system place where we try and come and discuss leadership principles in the context of the church. And maybe someday we'll figure out what those academic standards are and try and reach that standard. I've had people approach me about certain platforms out there that many are very critical against the church. And I try not to be just generally like, oh, that's evil, don't go there, don't listen there, but a lot of them I say, you know, generally speaking, I just don't think that platform is helpful in anybody's progression of whether they're in the church or out of the church. And so any thoughts as far as like, sometimes we can group in our platforms into this group that we're apologetics or groups. Yeah, here's why that approach, here's why discourage that kind of response. Because if a person is bringing it to you, they've already found something helpful about it. And so you're asking them in that moment to distrust themselves when they're in a very vulnerable state of mind. You're basically saying don't trust yourself. You're basically saying that helpfulness that you thought you felt. You're just wrong about it. So I actually would discourage that kind of approach that would I get it because I mean, I feel the same way. If I have a friend who starts listening to a Joe Rogan podcast or something, I'm like, oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Don't listen to that. That's very bad. Or I can say, okay, there's something in that show that's

connecting with my friend. What is it? And is there something is there something we can talk about? Can I make a connection there based on what they're connecting with there? And connect that to other good things that I like even more.

00:55:08 - 01:00:03

So find a place of connection. Why was this helpful to you? Why, what's happening here? What are your thoughts? And then validate, where they're coming from, because the reason that they brought it up at all because it's already been helpful in a way. Whether it should have been or not, whether it's correct or true or not, that is completely beside the point as to the fact that it has in some way, ease their mind or gave them something to hold onto. And you're just trying to take it away immediately and that's just not going to work. And so as people may become to you and ask specifically, what your thoughts on this organization, whether it's fair or maxim institute? I think there's a way to maybe openly point out, well, I see certain biases there, which is fine, but there are certain biases there. And that's worth to take into account. But you know what? Then lead in the discussion of what have you found helpful there and encouraging? How are you seeing it? Having more broader conversation that way. Yeah, that's exactly right. And to get as specific as possible, too. Sometimes tiptoe around everything. But I think you can drill down to, well, what exactly what's the exact topic? Oh, it's about women in the priesthood or something. Oh, okay. Well, let's talk about that thing. What's this, what is this resource saying and what do you like about that? Okay, okay. And to ask, are you interested in my perspective about that? And you make it clear to them that your care and regard for them is not contingent on them agreeing with you. That is crucial. And I say this to parents as well. Parents whose children are going through faith transitions or perhaps disaffection from the church. They have to know that your love for them or your relationship with them is not contingent on whether or not they stay connected to the church. And they need to know that explicitly. It can't be unspoken, because it's already a cultural assumption, if I leave, then I will be disowned or I will be my parents I'll devastate my parents and they won't love me or whatever. So we have to be clear with church members. And fellow family members and friends, regardless of where you end up, I love you because I love you. Not because your lottery saint, our relationship is not contingent on that. And leaders can make that clear as well. And then they have to do some hard thinking about what is that really look like then? To love someone without trying to change them right now. What does that kind of love really look like? Yeah. So blah, I'm curious as close to wrapping up here as you've talked about a lot of organizations, resources, academic standards. And again, as a late leader, so intimidating that I mean, how should a general lay leader engage with these resources, any advice there? Yeah, I would suggest just getting familiar with a couple of things from different entities. So get a book from the maxim institute and read it. Get something, get a presentation from a fair conference that you found to be really helpful or edifying and have that in your back pocket. Read something from interpreter from book of Mormon central. Check

something out from BYU studies. Get familiar with podcasts. I would include leading saints in that. You're addressing these kind of issues, not in every episode. But it comes up, right? So have a couple episodes in your back pocket. Read a couple of dialog articles. Just be familiar with a couple of things from different entities to give you a sense to give you something your own your own grasp of the situation. It'll take some time, but really not that much time. That's my recommendation for leaders if they want to connect with all these different things. Just become just become a little bit familiar with them. Check something out. Yeah. Yeah. I appreciate that, because it's not like nobody expects a bishop to be reading dialog cover to cover or watching every fair presentation. But I think as you do that, you might be surprised, the more I love attending and we've sponsored the fair conference the last few years and I watch one and I can't seem to back away from the next presentation. You know, it's just so fascinating to see how people are spending their research and time and articulating those things. So that's helpful. What else have we missed here? I have a few more closing questions here. But any other point or principle we haven't hit on that. One other thing I'd like to point out is that there are different general authorities that have different views about how apologetics should work. And this is really important, because you'll have some general authorities. And I'll mention elder Holland is an example who recently spoke at BYU and talked about musket fire and used these military metaphors and has talked about an aggressive ways about defending the truth. And that upset a lot of people that upset people who felt like that.

01:00:04 - 01:05:05

That kind of metaphor does not ring true to their heart. It seems aggressive. It doesn't seem like what they would expect from the gospel. Other people say, oh, of course. The gospel is strong and we got to stand up for truth and righteousness and be bold and stand for something. So you'll see members of the church, just like apostles and profits, what kind of have different views on this? And I completely in the pacifist camp, although I've been known to fire a musket here and there. It's literally a musket. The metaphorical. Yeah, yeah. You know, I can be a jerk sometimes. But I don't want to defend that as something that's good for the church or anything like that. I believe that an approach driven by peaceful charity is the way. So you have the musket thing. Then you also have Robert D Hales on apostle. He's passed away, but one of my favorites, a very, very quiet and loving man, and I have this quote here that I wanted to read and it says it says recently, a group of bright, faithful young Latter day Saints, wrote down the pressing questions on their mind. Once sister asked me, why doesn't the church defend itself more actively against accusations? To her question, I would say, one of mortality's great tests come when our beliefs are questioned or criticized. In such moments, we may want to respond aggressively to put up our dukes. But these are important opportunities to step back, pray and follow the savior's example. Remember that Jesus himself was despised and rejected. And in Lehi's dream, those coming to the savior also endured mocking and pointing fingers. When we

respond to our users as a savior did, we not only become more Christ like, but we invite others to feel his love and follow him as well. To respond in a Christ like way, can't be scripted or based on a formula. The savior responded differently in every situation when he was confronted by wicked king Herod he remained silent, so sometimes other hills is saying. Sometimes we don't see anything. When Jesus stood before pilot, he bore a simple and powerful testimony. Facing the money changers who were defiling the temple, he exercised his divine responsibility to preserve and protect what was sacred. He's talking about throwing over the tables. And by the way, I think that's a last resort. I think that's a Jesus prerogative. That's not a Blair parochet. Anyways, then, but the other hell's got emotional here. And he says, lift it up on a cross Jesus uttered the incomparable Christian response father forgive them for they know not what they do. Some people mistakenly think responses such as silence, meekness forgiveness, and bearing humble testimony or pass every week. But to love our enemies, bless them that curse us, do good to them that hate us and pray for them, which despitefully use us and persecute us takes faith, strength, and most of all, Christian courage. That speaks to me. That is gospel to me. And that's how I try to do to do apologetics. I love that. I'm just glad you showed that quote. Any other principle or thought I want to make sure we have given time to it all, but yeah, basically, I just would reiterate that the way we eat the way we talk, the way we connect matters even more than the exact things that we say. And when people are having questions and doubts, they do feel lonely. They do feel alone in the church. They feel like there's not a place to exist that way. And it's on church members to make that place to bring that space for people. The other thing I will say, too, as elder hills was saying love our enemies in the curses. If we just knee jerk defend everything, we miss opportunities for repentance. There are some things that we do as church members that we shouldn't do. There are things that we've corrected. There are things that the church has changed on. And if our knee jerk reaction is to treat any criticism like we're being horribly persecuted rather than to pause and reflect on what the criticism is and see if there's any kind of kernel of truth in it. We miss the opportunity to repent and change. It's the same in our personal lives when someone has something mean to say about us. We can reflect on what that is and say, you know, is there anything to that? Why would the person say that? Is there something I can change and we have an opportunity to repent? The church can do it in individuals can do it. Awesome. Well, Blair, I want to make sure we give a good solid plug for your new podcast, fireside. What should people if people search that and what should they expect to hear and what type of people you're interviewing, what your goals with that podcast? So the podcast is conversations with really incredible smart people who have written books or created art that speaks to fundamental religious questions. That sometimes maybe don't even seem religious. One of the episodes is called life's too short to pretend you're not religious. And this scholar's argument is that everybody has some kind of religion, something that their ultimate concerns, something that they love.

And you can tell what someone worships, according to how they spend their time, how they behave, how they spend their money. So at the root, even someone who professes to be a Christian or in our case latter day saint, may be worshipping something entirely different, depending on how we behave and how we orient our lives. That's what fireside is about is talking to scholars like him about really interesting issues in a way that talks to Latter day Saints, but it's not a latter day saint show. It's very broad. You're going to meet a lot of different people. The impetus behind it is the charge that we have to seek wisdom out of the best books. We have a scriptural injunction to seek wisdom out of the best books. And when that scripture was revealed, we didn't have all these latter day same books. We didn't have deseret book. We didn't have BYU press and all these other the maxim institute or whatever. This is talking about books throughout the world. And so that's what I'm trying to do is seek wisdom from the best books and talk to authors about them. So it's really just fun interesting conversations. It's fireside because we have firesides in the church, these kind of special guest speakers that are higher profile, but also this idea of where that word originally came from, which is a really intimate setting where you can have really deep conversations sitting around the fire at night under the stars and feeling the wonder and the awe of a night sky and feeling the warmth from a fire with people that you care about and who care about you. The feeling of safety and warmth. That's what firesides trying to do is build a place for people to spend time. Nice. And we'll each episode or does each episode have a flavor of latter day saint or is it just that happened to be that the host is a latter day saint? Yeah. The hostess of saint and then season one has I believe it will have ten episodes. It may have a few more, but two of those are Latter day Saints. It's mostly not latter day saint guests. Introducing them to our listeners. And I would also, I'm also trying to broaden that audience out. I'd like listeners, I also wanted to show, frankly, that people could listen to if they've left the church, but they have a hunger and a need for a connection of spirituality. Or they want something to be able to talk to, talk about with their parents who are still members or their friends who are still members and say, hey, it's awkward talking about talking about the church or something with them. But this fireside episode is great. We can talk about this and really have a connection there. I wanted something that could really reach people who are current members of the church, strong members, orthodox, heterodox, whatever, and also people who have left the church or who are just kind of disaffected from it. I really working hard to make something that everybody can gather around. There's a seat at the fireside for all of these people. Yeah. Well, I hope people check it out. Obviously, wherever they're listening to this podcast, they can probably just search fireside and Blair Hodges and should pop up there. Hopefully people check it out. And last question I have for you is I'm just curious as you have had this career this experience of exploring these different apologetic groups and perspectives and academic and intellectual thought. How has that journey specifically helped you gain more faith in and become a better follower of Jesus Christ? Well it disproved something that I believed, which was that the more education someone gets the more the more egotistical and the more the more they think they know and the more rigid they are and the more arrogant. And I've seen arrogance, I've seen scarlet arrogance I've displayed arrogance, but behind all of that would have really seen how much I have to learn. And the more I've learned about something, the more the horizon sort of recedes away. And oh, wait. I thought I had all these answers and what I found was even better questions. So that's what my faith journey, that's the shape my faith journey has taken is this ongoing quest for further light and knowledge. And it includes

uncertainty and my faith in Christ is one that's hopeful, not I don't know. I can't say that I know these things at this point. Not everybody who goes through who gets academic degrees winds up in this particular place, but it happens to be where I'm at. And so I'm not a knower, I'm a hoper and a believer. And I live in these ways and that's what belief means to me to live in certain ways, according to certain hopes. And I have those hopes. So education in general. Has just you think it's going to give you answers, but for me, it just gave me more questions. And that concludes this how I lead interview.

01:10:09 - 01:12:01

I hope you enjoyed it, and I would ask you, could you take a minute and drop this link in an email on social media in a text? Wherever it makes most sense and share it with somebody who could relate to this experience. And this is how we develop as leaders just hearing what the other guys doing, trying something out, testing, adjusting for your area, and that's where great leadership's discover, right? So we would love to have you share this with somebody in this calling or a related calling, and that would be great, and also if you know somebody, any type of leader who would be a fantastic guest on how I lead segment, reach out to us go to leading saints dot org slash contact, maybe send this individual an email, letting them know that you're going to be suggesting their name for this interview. We'll reach out to them. And see if we can line them up. So again, go to leading saints dot org slash contact, and there you can submit all the information and let us know. And maybe they will be on a feature how I lead segment on the leading saints podcast. And remember, text the word lead to four 747 four 7 in order to access the three most popular sessions of the liberating saints library. It came as a result of the position of leadership, which was imposed upon us by the God of heaven who brought forth a restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And when the declaration was made, concerning the all and only true and living church upon the face of the earth. We were immediately put in a position of loneliness. The loneliness of leadership from which we can not shrink nor run away. And of which we must face up with boldness and courage and ability.