“Did Not Our Heart Burn within Us?”
Luke 24:32 and the Mormon Testimony
Robert M. Bowman Jr.

“And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?” (Luke 24:32 KJV)

According to Mormons, this passage reveals how sincere seekers of truth are to know with certainty that something is true. The experience of an internal feeling that Mormons often describe as a “burning” convinces them that the Book of Mormon is the word of God, that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God, and that the LDS Church is the true church of God today. This “spiritual witness,” which Mormons assert comes from the Holy Ghost, is of special importance to their faith in the Book of Mormon. The LDS apologetics organization FAIR defends this belief by citing Luke 24:32.

Moreover, one is entitled to and should receive a spiritual witness from the Holy Ghost about the truthfulness of the scriptures (including the Bible and the Book of Mormon) before they accept them as true. This is frequently referred to by some as a burning in the bosom, using the phrase from the Doctrine and Covenants (D&C 9:8), and the same concept as recorded in Luke 24:32.

Mormons and Luke 24:32

The citation of this verse in the above article is not an isolated instance. For example, the LDS Church’s official curriculum for children encourages them to view this verse as referring to an experience of inspiration from the Spirit, or the Holy Ghost:

What did these disciples feel in their hearts when they spoke with Jesus? (Luke 24:32.) What would cause their hearts to burn? (The Holy Ghost.) How have you or your family members received inspiration from the Spirit?

An unsigned Viewpoint article in the LDS Church News entitled “Still Small Voice” seeks to relate this understanding of the verse to its context, in which the disciples were kept from recognizing Jesus when they first talked to him:

Why were they restrained from recognizing Him at first? Was it not for their own education? By association, they had now learned to identify the feeling they had as personal revelation. They now knew what such divine communication feels like, as it were.
Jeff Lindsay, a popular online Mormon apologist, asks regarding critics of the LDS testimony, “Would they condemn the disciples of Christ on the road to Emmaus who felt their hearts burn within them as a witness of truth and power when they heard Christ preach (Luke 24:32)?” He also comments, “In Luke 24:32, those who walked with the resurrected Christ along the road to Emmaus, not recognizing him, afterwards noted how their hearts had burned within them as He had taught them. This was not deceit, but a plain manifestation of divine influence.”

The LDS apologetics organization FAIR likewise cites Luke 24:32 to rebut criticism of the LDS “burning in the bosom” idea:

Interestingly, they did not say to each other, “We should have known it was Jesus because of his scriptural teaching.” . . . Would the critics likewise dismiss Jesus disciples’ witness because it was a “burning in the bosom”? Would they characterize this experience as merely the emotional rush of a Hollywood film?

A similar article on the same site elaborates on this argument:

The experience on the road to Emmaus illustrates again that a witness of the Holy Ghost is not just a feeling. The Holy Ghost is both a feeling or experiencing process, but it is not empty emotion. Rather, information is always transmitted with it. Thus, Jesus did not just give the disciples a feeling, but taught them information from the scriptures which gave intellectual or mental insight and satisfaction.
The mental conclusions they drew from that information were simultaneously confirmed by the inward burning that can accompany the Holy Spirit.
Would the critics likewise dismiss Jesus’ disciples’ witness because it was a burning in the bosom? Would they characterize this experience as merely the emotional?

J. Cooper Johnson, in an article on FAIR’s website, lampoons the “critics” who object to the Mormon burning in the bosom by imitating what he supposes would be their reaction to the experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus:

Perhaps they should have rejected that feeling in their bosom as indigestion? It appears that this feeling was perhaps caused by something they ate (bad bread?) and thus the truth that it testified of should not be trusted. Maybe they should have demanded more proof? All kidding aside, they also had felt a witness of the Holy Spirit, which testified of the truthfulness of the things that Christ had taught them. Even though they didn’t recognize it at the time, they later described it as a “feeling” in their “heart.”

Reviewing these various comments, we find that Mormons offer the following arguments for understanding Luke 24:32 to refer to the “burning in the bosom” as a feeling produced by the witness of the Holy Spirit convincing a person that a particular revelation (scripture, prophet) is true:

- God kept the disciples at first from recognizing Jesus, apparently so they would experience what personal revelation feels like.
Something must have caused the burning feeling in their hearts; this something was the Holy Spirit.

The disciples stated that their burning feeling occurred as Jesus was talking to them, showing that the burning was a witness of the truth that it was really Jesus and that he had really risen from the dead.

The disciples did not accept as true that it was Jesus based on his explanations of the Scriptures, but based on the burning feeling he had as he spoke to them.

The disciples stated that their burning feeling occurred as Jesus was explaining the Scriptures to them, showing that the burning was a witness of the truth of those Scriptures.

The disciples did not question or doubt what they felt in their hearts, but accepted what their hearts felt as from God.

To determine whether these explanations of the text are accurate, we must examine the verse in its context.


We may summarize (without oversimplifying) how Mormons understand the “burning in the bosom” principle exemplified in Luke 24:32 in terms of the following three stages or steps:

- The believer (sincerely, attentively) listens to (or reads) revelation from God (Jesus or other heavenly figure speaking, an apostle or prophet teaching, a scriptural book, etc.), wishing to know the truth (see the LDS scriptures D&C 9:8; Moroni 10:4-5).
- The believer receives a witness of the Holy Spirit, in the form of a burning feeling in the heart (the “burning in the bosom”), to the truth of that revelation (heavenly figure, prophet, scriptural book, etc.).
- The believer is convinced that the revelation is true.

Despite the confidence with which Mormons adduce Luke 24:32 in support of their doctrine of the burning in the bosom, the verse in context simply does not fit the LDS doctrine. My claim here is not merely that the verse does not teach it, but that the passage read as a whole, putting the verse in its proper context, teaches something contrary to the LDS position.

1. **The disciples to whom Jesus spoke were in an unbelieving mindset.**

We begin by putting the passage in its broadest historical context. The Romans had just brutally crucified Jesus (Luke 23). The disciples’ master teacher was dead. The two disciples in question—Cleopas (24:18) and an unnamed disciple—were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus, about seven miles away (24:13). There is a very important and obvious reason why they were doing so: they had given up on Jesus. The stranger (Jesus, unbeknownst to them) who joined them on the road asked them what they were discussing and why they were so “sad” (24:17). They explained that Jesus, whom they had regarded as a prophet, had been handed over by their religious leaders to the Romans and crucified (vv. 19-20). “But we trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel,” they lamented (v. 21). The past-tense wording here, “we
trusted” (not “we trust”) is significant: they had trusted or believed that Jesus was going to be the one to redeem Israel, but they did not believe this anymore. Even after hearing from some of Jesus’ women followers that the tomb was empty and that angels had told them that Jesus had risen, and even after some of the men had verified that the tomb was empty (vv. 22-24), these two disciples did not retain any confidence in Jesus. They had not even a glimmer of hope since, if they had, they surely would not have left Jerusalem at that particular time. (If you thought Jesus might have just risen from the dead, would you choose that particular moment to leave town?) They abandoned ship as soon as they heard that rescue was on its way!

This explains Jesus’ criticism of the two men: “O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken” (v. 25). Not only was the mindset of the two disciples something less than earnest faith and a seeking heart, it was one of unbelief. They were not seeking the truth about Jesus; they were running in the opposite direction, away from the truth.

In this context, it becomes clear that the reason why God kept the two men from recognizing Jesus (v. 16) was not so they could learn what a personal revelation felt like. Luke does not say explicitly why they were kept from recognizing Jesus, but given the emphasis in the passage on their lack of faith, the best explanation is that they were not ready to see Jesus. Merely seeing someone who looked exactly like Jesus apparently may not have been enough to break through their stubborn mindset.

Cleopas and his traveling companion were not the worst sinners or unbelievers in the world. However, they simply do not fit the LDS paradigm of the pious seeker ardently praying to receive the testimony of the Holy Spirit in the form of a burning in the bosom. They weren’t even looking for Jesus; they were, in fact, going in the wrong direction. Yet Jesus graciously went looking for them, like the good shepherd in his own parable of the lost sheep found earlier in this same Gospel (15:3-7).

2. The burning in the disciples’ hearts was not a spiritual witness to confirm the truth.

Luke says nothing to indicate that the feeling the disciples had of a “burning” in their hearts was a spiritual confirmation or “witness” to the truth of what they had seen or heard. He doesn’t offer any explicit explanation of their feeling, but we can rule out some sort of inner revelatory experience that convinced them of something. The reason we can rule this out is simple: it comes at the wrong time.

Luke quotes the disciples as commenting on the fact that their hearts had been burning within them “while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures” (v. 32). During all this time, the two disciples had no idea that it was Jesus talking to them. They did not yet believe that Jesus had risen from the dead, despite hearing reports that he had. The “burning” feeling did not reveal anything to them, and it did not convince them of anything.

It is understandable and even plausible to suggest that the “burning” feeling in their hearts was the result of the Holy Spirit. Luke reports John the Baptist saying that the Messiah would baptize people “with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16). Jesus later said that he had come “to send fire
on the earth” (12:49), which might be referring to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. In
the Book of Acts (also written by Luke), the Holy Spirit manifests his presence in the apostles
through what looked like tongues of fire (Acts 2:3). So it is just possible that the “burning”
feeling in their hearts is to be connected in some way with the presence of the Holy Spirit within
them. Assuming for the sake of discussion that such was the case, what the Holy Spirit was doing
in their hearts was not providing a spiritual witness or revelation proving or convincing them of
some revealed truth. Rather, if the Holy Spirit were involved in this feeling, it would fit better
with the context to say that the Holy Spirit was working within their stubborn hearts to be open
to the truth. The order would not be (1) receive the truth, then (2) receive a spiritual witness from
the Holy Spirit. Rather, the order would be (1) have a heart opened up to hear the truth, then (2)
receive the truth.

Indeed, it is possible to argue that the “burning” feeling was an inner experience of conviction—a
hot awareness produced by the Holy Spirit in the disciples’ heart that they had abandoned their
Lord and lost faith in him. There is some precedent for this usage in the Old Testament. David,
under conviction of his sin, wrote, “My heart was hot within me, while I was musing the fire
burned” (Ps. 39:3). It is interesting to note that fire in Luke’s writings is commonly a symbol for
the coming judgment on the wicked (Luke 3:9, 17; 9:54; 17:29; cf. Acts 2:19). Perhaps the
burning feeling was an experience of the Holy Spirit breaking down the disciples’ stubbornness
of heart, breaking open their closed minds, making them aware that they had given up on Jesus
too soon. Better to have the Spirit judge you now and bring you to repentance and faith while
there is still opportunity than to wait for the Day when the fire of God’s holiness will bring
nothing but judgment.

Another explanation for the burning feeling is that it describes a rising elation or joy or
excitement as the disciples’ gloomy pessimism was starting to give way to the hope of the
resurrection. Joyous and glad feelings evoked by the gospel events is a recurring theme in the
Gospel of Luke (1:14, 44, 47, 58; 2:10; 10:17, 20-21; 13:17; 19:6), including the resurrection and
its aftermath (24:41, 52). Many biblical scholars currently explain the “burning” in the disciples’
hearts as an excitement or similar emotional response as they began to realize at some level that
the reports of Jesus’ resurrection might be true after all. Translation reference works for the
United Bible Societies explain the language as “an idiom for joy and enthusiasm,” “one of joy,
delight, enthusiasm, energy.” They suggest that in some languages, where the imagery of hearts
“burning” might be misunderstood as describing anger or other irrelevant emotions, the text may
need to be paraphrased: “our hearts were beating for joy” or “How delighted (or, excited) we felt
when he talked with us…”1 Darrell Bock suggests that the verb “burning” is comparable to our
idiom “to light a fire under someone,” connoting that the disciples were excited with “intense

Translators (Leiden: Brill, for the United Bible Societies, 1971), 758; Robert G. Bratcher, A
1982), 388.
emotion” as they listened to Jesus’ exposition of the Scriptures.\(^2\) Alan Culpepper brings this explanation nicely into the larger context of the passage when he comments, “The Emmaus story, therefore, sets before the reader two sorts of responses: One may either be ‘slow of heart to believe’ (v. 25) or know the joy of those whose hearts burn within them.”\(^3\)

The explanation that the burning feeling was an experience of joy is, of course, compatible with the view that it describes an inner work of the Holy Spirit. Whatever the burning feeling was, it simply does not fit the passage to say that it was a spiritual, personal revelation given to pious seekers of truth to confirm the truth of the revelation they had accepted. If the burning is meant to intimate a work of the Holy Spirit, the work was that of convicting the disciples of their unbelief, illuminating their hearts to be receptive to the truth that Jesus was making known to them, or overcoming their sadness and discouragement with joy.

3. The burning feeling in the disciples’ hearts is not the basis for their belief or anyone else’s.

Cleopas and his companion did not merely have some inner experience, some feeling or spiritual realization. The two disciples actually saw Jesus with their physical eyes; he walked with them, talked with them, and broke bread with them. God supernaturally kept them from recognizing him at first (v. 16), but at the end God allowed them to recognize Jesus (v. 31). The wording in these two verses makes it clear that at the end, their natural sight was able to recognize Jesus and they realized that it had been Jesus all along. They had an unmistakable encounter with Jesus, whom they had known personally.

The two disciples came away from their experience convinced of two things. First, they knew that Jesus had risen from the dead. Their knowledge of this fact was not based on their emotional state, since, as has just been explained, the “burning” in their hearts occurred while they remained unaware that it was Jesus. What persuaded them that it was Jesus was that they had seen and heard him. Their eyes recognized his physical appearance at the very end of their encounter with him. Then they immediately realized that it had been Jesus all along. The text also implies that God used Jesus’ action of breaking the bread and passing it to them as a “trigger” to open their eyes to Jesus’ identity (vv. 30, 35). Then everything about him came back to their minds confirming their recognition of him, including the way he expounded the Scriptures. One might even suggest that they now realized that the “burning” feeling they had when he was speaking to them was a feeling of recognition—perhaps because that excitement, that passionate joy, was something they had experienced in the past when listening to the Master. To that extent, one could infer, the disciples may have been saying in verse 32 that this feeling was yet another thing that should have made them realize that it was Jesus. It had not, of course; they had been too slow of heart to believe, too wrapped up in their own disappointment and disillusionment, to realize that only one person had ever made them feel that way. The crucial

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point here is that to the extent that feeling was a feeling of recognition, it could be such for them only because they had already known Jesus personally. Now that they had seen him again, been allowed to recognize him physically, and realized that his speech, his handling of Scripture, even his manner of breaking bread all were that of their familiar teacher, they knew that it was Jesus. Their experience, then, has nothing to do with receiving a supernatural revelation in their hearts informing them of the truth of Jesus’ resurrection. They knew it was true because they already knew him and they had now seen him with their own eyes.

Second, they knew that Jesus’ death fulfilled the Jewish Scriptures. Jesus’ teaching did not convince the disciples that the Scriptures were true; as pious, traditionalist Jewish men, they already accepted the Scriptures as the word of God without question. What the two disciples now understood and believed was that Jesus’ death had been neither an accident nor an indictment against Jesus as a blasphemer or criminal, but a divinely intended event in fulfillment of the Scriptures. On what basis were they convinced of this fact? The answer is obvious: Jesus had risen from the dead and told them himself that his death had fulfilled the Scriptures. The resurrection was God’s validation of Jesus as the Messiah. It proved that Jesus was exactly who he said he was. It was not their feelings that convinced them of this truth; the “burning” feeling had nothing whatsoever to do with convincing them or confirming to them that this was the correct understanding of the Scriptures. They knew Jesus was the fulfillment of Israel’s messianic expectations in Scripture because he had conquered death itself. Now they understood that the Messiah’s mission was not to conquer the Romans with physical weapons of warfare. Rather, the Messiah had come to conquer the hearts of all people—even those of his own slow of heart disciples—by suffering and dying for them and then conquering death on their behalf by rising from the dead.

Luke’s account of Jesus’ appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus has much to teach us. One lesson that we should not draw from this passage, however, is that we should seek a special feeling in our hearts as a means of knowing or confirming that something is true. The disciples’ experience simply does not fit this concept. They were not looking for Jesus or truth, but had given up on Jesus and were running from the truth. They were not seeking a spiritual experience. The feeling of their hearts afire as they listened to Jesus was not a supernatural revelation but most likely a natural, emotional response to someone they should have recognized but could not because of their disillusioned frame of mind. They only realized in retrospect the significance of that feeling after they had literally recognized Jesus with their own eyes. It was Jesus’ resurrection and his own explanation of the Scriptures, not their feeling, that convinced them that Jesus had conquered death and fulfilled the Scriptures as the promised Messiah. That is a solid foundation of fact on which to base a sound Christian faith.