

My schizophrenic love/hate relationship with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints...

In October of 2018, after 45 years of being surrounded by Mormonism, my “shelf” came crashing down and I had a “crisis of faith”. I had never even heard of the “shelf” until a few months prior. For me, personally, I had always thought of it more like carrying around a sack of pebbles. Every time I had a problem or question that just didn’t set right with me, it would be like taking a pebble or a small rock and putting it into my sack and slinging it over my shoulder as I continued up the pathway of faith.

I think it is important to emphasize at this point that I had NEVER gone out of my way to look for pebbles or rocks to put in my sack. In fact, quite the opposite is true. I would purposefully avoid and shun anything that I had heard was “anti”. If someone had been excommunicated, I automatically would discount or be suspect of anything they had to say. They were automatically an untrustworthy source as far as I was concerned. Up until last October, I had lived the Mormon path. I was an Eagle Scout, served a mission, married in the temple, and had remained a temple recommend-holding member of the church ever since.

I think it is also important to emphasize that I have always struggled with the church. It has never been easy for me. I thought church was boring as a child. I sluffed most of seminary. I had no plans to serve a mission until I started searching and learning about the church during my junior and senior year of high school. During my mission and post-mission, despite my belief in the grace of Christ, I have sometimes struggled with feeling like I wasn’t doing enough; like I wasn’t giving enough and working hard enough and praying enough and having enough faith.

I also struggled with feeling like I was continually straddling the fence a lot of the time. Perhaps that would explain why I often felt like I was alone in my relationship with the divine; not really feeling the spirit and why my prayers were just bouncing off the ceiling. Additionally, I often felt like I had spent countless hours in church listening to “Sunday school” answers in lessons and meetings that left me spiritually starved. I remember having tremendous problems with the temple in part because one of the promises you make is giving ALL your time,

talents, and everything with which you have been blessed or may be blessed with to the church. When I was honest with myself, however, I just wasn't that way.

Some members have no problem making that promise in the temple. My parents are my best personal example of this. They are unyielding, unflinching, and all-in when it comes to the church. They are such good people! They have given and sacrificed everything expected and would gladly give more. They are tremendous examples of trying to live the gospel and are definitely "Saints" in my book. Part of my cognitive dissonance stemmed from watching them and people like them and realizing that I was not measuring up to that standard, but also that a part of me didn't want to either. I was always holding part of myself back. I often felt the scripture in Revelations described me perfectly, along with what God thought of my efforts: "... because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth". I wanted so much to be a disciple of Christ, but often wondered if I was like the hypocrites he condemns and says to depart for professing, but not really knowing him.

I remember my neighbor, a good friend who also became our bishop, approached me about becoming a high priest. I should have felt ecstatic; like I was progressing in a normal path in the church. Instead of feeling that way, I felt a combination of guilt and foreboding. I felt guilty because I lacked faith in the priesthood in general and because I didn't feel like I had the testimony to be in positions of authority in the church. Did I have what it took to be a bishop myself? Did I have the faith and testimony? Could I make that kind of a commitment feeling the way I did?

Things came to a head for me when my oldest daughter started seriously dating a boy and I was facing the real possibility of her getting married. Some part of me didn't want her to get married at all because I felt like she was too young, but another part of me didn't want her to take out her endowment and get married in the temple. In addition, my thoughts were increasingly negative toward my remaining children serving a mission and continuing down the Mormon path. I was torn between what I should be feeling about the church, and what I was actually feeling about the church. Why the dissonance? I couldn't get over why I was feeling this way. My bag of pebbles and rocks that I had been carrying around had been getting heavier and heavier. It was one thing for me to have

issues with the church. It was completely another to realize the effect it would have on my children. Did I truly want that for them? Why, when I should be having nothing but feelings of happiness about my daughter getting married in the temple, was I also having thoughts of dread?

Up until this point, the only real exposure I had to anything that began to really shed a light on some of the “troubling” aspects of the history of the church happened quite by accident. On a deployment, my wife had given me a book called “Joseph Smith, Rough Stone Rolling”. She had never read the book and simply threw it in a care package and mailed it to me. It was written by an LDS scholar who had been a bishop and patriarch and is still a believing member of the church. Among other things, it was the first time I was really exposed to the length of Joseph Smith’s polygamy and polyandry. It was shocking and appalling to me. But I found my ways to explain things away and rationalize and give him the benefit of the doubt. That wasn’t just a little pebble that I put in my bag, though. That one was a rock for sure.

Most of my remaining rocks and pebbles mostly stemmed from my lack of faith and feeling like I was on autopilot when it came to the church. I would have fleeting glimpses of feeling the spirit, but the majority of the time I felt that I was on my own. Another chunk of pebbles came from simply experiencing the church over the decades. Were LDS people happier than other people? I always felt that with the knowledge of the plan of salvation, Mormons should be the happiest people on the planet! Was that the case? Did I witness miracles and a difference in my life compared to others? Did the prophets and apostles ever reveal anything or prophecy about anything significant? Did people who were given the gift of the Holy Ghost after baptism really have a difference in their lives? Was my temple marriage the blissful fairytale I had hoped for or did we struggle like any other marriage? Has there ever been an outpouring of the spirit like the Kirtland temple dedication described? After all, we have had scores of temples dedicated since Kirtland. My expectations of church membership and the resultant blessings were not playing out the way I thought they would. In addition, I was feeling more and more like the church was just a giant corporation instead of the only true church on the face of the whole earth.

One of my strengths of my testimony was when I received my patriarchal blessing. I hadn't told anyone, but I was seriously considering postponing my mission until I felt like I was more prepared. My testimony and knowledge of the gospel was young and tender at the time. In it, I was told that I should serve my mission at the normal and appropriate time. That was such a boost to me, because it really made me feel like God knew me personally and was looking out for me. However, over the years my blessing has also hurt my faith. Some of the things it describes have not materialized, at least not to my expectations. That, in turn, has made me repeatedly question my own worthiness and has been a source of continued frustration and dissonance.

Unmet expectations. Those two words speak volumes for me. I have tried to emphasize examples of some of my unmet expectations in the previous two paragraphs because I hope it will help you understand part of why I feel the way I do. I read once that people don't really divorce over money or sex or fill-in-the-blank. What they really divorce over is a failure of expectations in their spouse/marriage that has boiled over beyond their personal breaking point. That is part of my simplified explanation of what has happened to me with regards to the church. My expectations have not been met, and I have "divorced" myself from the church as a result. I'm getting a little ahead of myself, though. Let me return to the chronology of my journey...

Things finally reached my boiling point back in October of 2018. For the preceding months I had immersed myself in reading, studying, praying, listening to podcasts, etc. I was sick and tired of feeling like I was on the fence. I was tired of the dissonance; the never-ending mental gymnastics. I needed to decide to either dedicate my life to the church and be all in, or I needed to figure out why I was continually resisting. My study was at a fevered pitch. I couldn't hardly think about or do anything else. I studied the scriptures, prayed, read books, and scoured the internet. I threw myself into this exercise having a testimony of the gospel, but also having struggles and doubts. My primary purpose was to strengthen that testimony. When I came upon things that were difficult, I would look for ways to make it fit the narrative I had been taught my whole life. I was not looking for excuses to abandon my faith. I was looking for answers and for ways to come to grips with my feelings of dissonance. I wanted to be able to make that complete commitment to God.

My searching led me down rabbit holes, and the holes leading to the rabbit holes. It wasn't just enough to read the CES letter. I had to watch Jeremy's interviews. I had to learn about his life and know his agendas. I looked up every single reference and clicked on every single hyperlink from that letter. I couldn't just listen to Mormon Stories podcasts. I had to research John Dehlin and learn his life story. I wouldn't just read something and blindly accept it. I would go to FAIR and The Maxwell Institute (previously FARMS) to read what the apologists of the church had to say about it. I wanted to feel like I was hanging my hat on trustworthy sources. I also wanted to feel like I was an impartial jury. I would read the pros and the cons of every argument and every sticking point. I wanted to feel like I was only searching for truth, wherever that path took me.

And I wanted to be receptive to the spirit. If this is what I needed to be doing with my life and what I needed to be teaching my kids, I needed God to take a bigger lead in showing me. After all, I was supposed to have been given the gift of the Holy Ghost to guide me through my life; to help me make difficult decisions. If there was ever a time I needed help with decisions, this was it! I figured God could at least throw me a bone, a scrap from his table, anything... Over this time, however, not only did God remain silent to my pleadings, but the "anti" that I had been taught to shun and avoid my entire life was increasingly coming to the surface as being true and historically factual. Many of these admissions to the truth came from the church from their own essays on their own website (I will include a link at the end of this paper)!

Then it hit me... that fateful day in the beginning of October (anyone who has seen the movie "Inception" will appreciate the power of an idea and what happened next). I had the simple thoughts in my mind, knowing what I know now, that if Joseph Smith were alive today, would I follow him? Would I trust him? Would I trust my life and the life of my family to him? Did I really believe that he was a prophet of God and that he had restored the truth to the world? I honestly asked that question to myself, and my answer came rushing back. NO, he did not and NO, I would not. And then I asked myself if I trusted the church. Did I really believe that this church was the ONLY true church? Should I dedicate my life, my money, my time, my everything? Again, my answer was NO. And then my shelf... my sack of pebbles and rocks... yea verily, it came to pass that my entire world came crashing down!

Not that I expect perfection from anyone. I am full of flaws and shortcomings. The church is full of flaws and shortcomings because it is made up of people full of flaws and shortcomings. That said, as a church who claims to be the ONLY true church, run by God and Jesus Christ at the head, I expect a higher standard and I expect a higher standard from Joseph Smith and the leaders of the church. As a minimum, I expect honesty and an admittance of mistakes if they are warranted. And I expect those mistakes to be corrected. Was Joseph Smith an honest man, and is this church an honest church? Based on my research and my lifetime of experience in the church, I would say that there is much good from both, but that there is also glaring dishonesty from both as well. Like I have tried to explain before, my unmet expectations for both Joseph Smith and the church had exceeded my personal tolerances.

(I am going to interject here and say that if you are a believing member of the church, you will probably immediately discount what I will write next or flat out stop reading altogether because I have admitted where I stand. Some people just don't care about stuff like this and are perfectly content to remain ignorant to these issues. I will simply say that you are only getting one side of your pancake cooked if you only read and learn from "church approved" sources. Much of my feeling of betrayal stems from a narrative that has been fed to me my entire life that has not been the whole truth. Because of this, I have been left with a pancake that is a "burnt offering" on one side and a doughy, uncooked mess on the other. Much of what you read if you continue is probably going to sound like the "anti" you have been taught to reject and avoid. Perhaps you have never heard of something or someone I reference. I hope you will educate yourself on these issues, even if this is difficult for you. After all, do you think God wants nothing but blind obedience? Does he never want you to research or use your brain or read or ponder or think? Didn't this entire church begin because Joseph Smith had doubts and questions? Don't we continually preach as missionaries to not take our word for anything, but to study and to ask and pray? If you haven't heard of something like the Kinderhook Plates, polyandry, or whatever, look it up! By all means, don't take my word for anything either. The information is out there and it's not hard to find. Much of this information stems from the church on their own website in their own essays. Let the facts speak for themselves. There are many who know all of the problems I am going to present here that still

have testimonies. They aren't ignorant to the difficult aspects of Mormonism. I simply believe that EVERY member deserves the right to know not just a whitewashed version, but even the ugly and human and difficult aspects of the church and to have the right to be able to make informed decisions, that's all.)

Why wasn't Joseph Smith honest? Does an honest person take people on treasure hunting expeditions claiming to be able to find the riches by looking at a stone dropped in a hat and charge money for those services (they never found anything)? Does an honest person lie and keep secrets from his wife? Does an honest person say one thing in public and then do something completely different in private? Does an honest person have suit after suit brought up against them in courts of law? Does an honest person change their story time and time again? Does an honest person have secretive extra-marital relationships? Does an honest person need to silence others? Does an honest person get people to sign affidavits that are knowingly false? Does an honest person plagiarize and then take credit for the work? Does an honest person use a position of authority to manipulate or coerce?

Why isn't the church honest? Is it honest to portray the translation of the Book of Mormon the way it has until recently (think of all the artwork you have ever seen of the translation process)? Is it honest to only teach a rose-colored narrative of its history? Is it honest to keep records and details locked away from public view? Is it honest to excommunicate and silence anyone who has an opposing view, even if their view is based on legitimate and honest questions? Is it honest to have a second anointing ceremony in the temple that is kept secret from the rest of the membership? Is it honest to make changes to The Book of Mormon to suit the changing narrative of the godhead? Is it honest to make changes to the Book of Commandments (precursor to our current D&C) to suit their changing doctrines as well? Is it honest to spend over a billion (with a B) and-a-half dollars on a shopping mall? Is it honest to refuse to return tithing donations back to disaffected members? Is it honest to sweep under the rug embarrassing issues and past practices? Is it honest to be coming clean with so many of their problematic issues only now? Is it honest to have thrown so many people under the bus, labeled as "anti" and "apostate", only to find out over time that many of these people were telling the truth? Is it honest to portray the members of the church in the numbers that it does at conference? Is it honest to say that you

believe in obeying the laws of the land, issue a manifesto to abolish polygamy, and then continue to practice polygamy in secret? It goes on and on!

Then there is the myriad of separate issues! Blacks and the priesthood, prophets of old being thrown under the bus by today's prophets, The Book of Abraham translation, the Kinderhook plates, Proposition 8, kids of gay parents not being able to be baptized, nothing significant being prophesied or revealed, the archeology and linguistics of the Book of Mormon not measuring up, DNA, changes to the temple endowment, Masonry in the temple, Book of Mormon anachronisms and other problems, different versions of the first vision, etc. The list just goes on and on! Each of these issues, when taken separately, are not a giant problem that can't be glossed over and forgiven and rationalized or given over to faith. The problem comes when the massive tidal wave they all produce comes ashore. The "dark night of the soul" is a natural byproduct of the mist of darkness when the rod one has been holding on to (white knuckled with both hands) turns out to be made of something other than iron and is pointed in a direction besides due North to the tree of life.

In my journey, I found that many of the things that bothered other people were things that really didn't bother me at all (at least not before), and some of the things that have bothered me aren't even brought up. For example, the translation process is something that really bothers some people. That was the catalyst that eventually led my youngest sister out of the church. Her pancake had been partially scorched because she had always been taught the familiar narrative of Joseph translating the plates using the Urim and Thummim with Oliver or faithful Emma writing down the perfect translation of the most correct book on earth, not by him looking at a "peep stone" in the bottom of his hat with the plates never even being used at all. I always figured it was a miracle, no matter how it happened. However, I always struggled with simply the sheer volume of information contained in the Book of Mormon. My missionary Book of Mormon is 531 pages long. That doesn't even include the supposed 116 lost manuscript pages. And two-thirds of the plates were sealed. How on earth is that even remotely possible? The math just doesn't add up for me. One "reformed Egyptian" hieroglyph would have to represent an entire paragraph or pages for that matter. That concept has always bugged me.

What about Nephi beheading Laban? That would make a grotesquely bloody mess. The thought that Nephi was able to put on his clothes at all has never sat well with me either. They would have had blood all over them!

What about the Jaredites? I get the Brother of Jared being able to have light and air in their submarine boats. What never sat well with me is their physiological needs? You know, doing the number one and number two? And having flocks of animals? Not to mention having enough food and water for a year? These submarine boats must have been massive! It makes me think of the NASA engineers building the space capsule but forgetting to make the obvious allowance for the physiological needs of the astronauts. Sorry to bring up things that are so trivial and juvenile, but they were pebbles in my sack.

Or sheep in the Book of Mormon. If sheep or other domesticated animals weren't even around in America during that time period, it throws a wrench into the story of Ammon, no matter how much I loved it. Never mind the problems in 3rd Nephi when Christ teaches the people using all the references to sheep and being the good shepherd; of being the other sheep of his fold. Christ taught using stories and parables that people could relate to. He would not be teaching people in America using references that they would not understand or an animal they had never seen.

These are a few examples, but there are plenty more. One of the things that I have discovered in my searching is that there are no good answers to many of the common problems of the church other than to have faith and trust your feelings. These questions and problems are not new. They are not unknown to the highest levels of the church either. These questions have been personally presented to the prophets and apostles of the church by other people who had questions long before I did. Some of these people have shared their experiences after meeting with these apostles. In all their cases I have learned about, they are told to have faith and be believing, but that they don't have any answers to many of their questions.

One of the things that I have realized lately is the iron grip of control Mormonism can have on its members. It wasn't until I had my faith crisis and stepped back from it all that I realized it's reach. It influenced every major decision of my life and plenty of the minor ones for that matter. It was my circle of friends. It was

often the topic of conversation or an inside joke. It was my marriage. It was the food I ate and drank. It was the underwear I wore. It was three hours on Sundays, meetings and firesides and hours and hours during the week. Mutual, callings, scripture study, early morning seminary, home and visiting teaching visits, choir practice, service projects, scouts, other meetings and commitments. It is your relationship with your family and siblings. It is everything! Only when I rejected it have I realized the depth of my loss and the colossal sphere of its influence in my life; the GAPING void that remains.

This control has been manifested in the stories and experiences of others who have been excommunicated. This point is especially poignant to me because I have served in our military. I have a love of our freedoms and a small appreciation of the price that has been paid for those freedoms. I am sensitive to anyone who is being pressured or is not allowed to say certain things, especially if it is the truth (because, let's face it, sometimes the truth is ugly). When I see people like Jeremy Runnells, Bill Reel and John Dehlin being excommunicated, I see it as a desperate attempt of the leadership of the church to maintain control. After all, if someone has been excommunicated, what they have written or what they have to say is automatically rejected or discounted. I know, because that is what I did my whole life.

I suppose once this paper gets read, if it gets widely circulated or heaven forbid goes viral, I will be expecting a knock on my door with representatives from the stake with an envelope for them to deliver. Then my name will be added to the many others who have been excommunicated for publicly asking questions and sharing what I believe to be legitimate problems about the church.

Ironically, one of the things that happens to people like me is that I get labeled as "apostate" and "anti". I am lost and deceived. Other members will probably assume I'm addicted to porn or have some giant hidden sin in my life. Either that or I must want the freedom to live a life of sin outside of the church. I am a casualty in the war with Satan! Members will automatically shut down and dig in even deeper and hold on even tighter. How do I know this? Because those are some of the same assumptions I made and how I have reacted to "apostates" in the past, and that is the reaction I have witnessed from other members in my experience with the church. I have also witnessed it firsthand from some of my

associates, my wife and from my daughters. They don't understand, because they haven't been exposed to or researched the things that I have. They haven't experienced the dissonance that I have. They are doing exactly what they have been taught to do. Bravo!

From my perspective, I am not guilty of any major sin (although I am full of flaws and shortcomings). The thing I am guilty of is honestly searching for the truth. I am guilty of not being willing to live a fake life in order to maintain the status quo. I am guilty of loving my family and wanting what is best for them. I am guilty of learning about and trying to live my religion.

And I can tell you this: I have had different trials in my life. I have had disappointments and heartaches. But going through the pain of losing my faith, having to face (and completely shatter the expectations/disappoint) my wife and my children, family and friends; not being able to see my daughter get married, and to try to pick up the shattered pieces of whatever remains of my faith has been THE most painful and difficult experience of my life. In many ways, I would not wish this experience on my worst enemy. Yet another part of me feels like every member deserves to know the full truth, despite the pain it could cause. How I wish my "faith transition" and the subsequent mess (I want to use other words here to describe the process, but I need to keep the language PG) it created would have happened AFTER my daughter got married? How I wish I didn't have to face continued conundrums with my remaining children. However, despite the difficulties and the pain of this experience, I am grateful for it, and I am happier now that I can look back with the 20/20 vision of hindsight.

So, where has my journey of faith led? What have I learned? How do I feel about some of the controversial issues surrounding the church and that I struggle with personally? For the remainder of this paper, I will try to explain my questions and viewpoints. I will lay out the "facts" as I have come to understand them. I will share some of my complaints and disagreements with the church but then I will try to share what I love about the church. I will try to share what I DO stand for and what I DO believe in. So here goes:

Polygamy and Polyandry

This is probably one of the biggest problems I have with the church. I have looked at this from all kinds of angles and read all the arguments and apologetics. I tried to give Joseph Smith the benefit of the doubt when I first learned about it.

However, once I dug deeper, I just couldn't let it slide. There are just too many glaring problems and inconsistencies. Even if you were to base the practice on doctrine presented about it in the 132nd section of the D&C, do some research and you will quickly find that Joseph Smith didn't follow it.

Why would he marry a mother and a daughter from the same family? Why would he marry sisters? Why would he marry a woman who was already pregnant with her current husbands' child? Why would he marry women that obviously weren't virgins? Why would he marry before the sealing powers were supposedly restored by Moses and Elijah? Why would he marry 10 years before receiving the revelation contained in D&C 132? Why, if he loved Emma so dearly and the sealing doctrine was so important, why would she not be sealed to him as soon as possible instead of being twenty something or more in his list of wives? Why would he publicly deny the practice over and over again while he had been secretly practicing it for years? Why would he get the signed affidavit of the same, knowing full well that it was a blatant lie and that many of the signers of the affidavit were also practicing polygamy? Why would he be sealed to wives who were already married to believing and worthy members of the church? Why did he not follow the teachings of his own Book of Mormon on the matter? Why would he send men on missions and then marry their wives when they were gone? Why would he keep a majority of his marriages secret from Emma? Why would Joseph knowingly break the law of the land at the time regarding monogamy? Why would he have a sham marriage ceremony performed for Emma to women he had already married secretly before? Why would he order the destruction of the printing press of the Nauvoo Expositor? Why would he marry teenagers, the youngest known being 14 years old? Why would polygamy continue to be practiced in secret after the first manifesto? Why did it take a second? Why are people excommunicated for practicing it now? Why would Gordon B. Hinckley say the practice is not doctrinal on Larry King, yet it is still contained in the D&C and it is still performed at the highest levels with Elder Oaks and President Nielson being sealed in the temple to multiple women? Why would

polygamy leave a trail of pain and heartache and loneliness in its wake if it were a commandment from God? Why would apologists be so obsessed with trying to separate marriages for “time only” and “for time and eternity”? Why would the church try so hard to document all of Joseph Smith’s sealings when it was wrestling for control with the RLDS church, then try so hard to distance itself from them now? In the same vein, why would the church want to clarify which relationships were sexual and which ones were not? Why would an angel with a flaming sword have to threaten Joseph Smith with destruction if the practice wasn’t adopted (no, I’m not making this up. Go read the church essay)? Why do so many members of the church believe that polygamy started with Brigham Young and not Joseph Smith? Why would God command something that would be such a black eye and road block for so many of his children to even consider investigating the church, not to mention a primary reason why so many leave the church once they find out about it? Why doesn’t the church simply admit that the way that polygamy and polyandry was practiced was a mistake? Could it be that there is fear of the entire building collapsing if some major support structures of the foundation are found to be defective?

I no longer give Joseph Smith a pass on this. I don’t defend or condone it in the history of the church. I believe it was a colossal mistake at best and at worst, in today’s age (and arguably in his own time), he would have gone to jail as a sexual criminal. I also don’t accept the continued teachings presented about it in the church today. I think it’s wrong and I whole-heartedly agree with President Hinkley... “It’s not doctrinal”. Imagine living back during the Nauvoo time period of the church. Would you honestly be ok with your own wife or daughter working around Joseph in the mansion?

The Book of Abraham

The Pearl of Great Price contains doctrines of the church that aren’t really contained or expounded anywhere else. I think that parts of it are thought-provoking and inspiring. I never paid much attention to a lot of it, though. In fact, I would bet that aside from some of the more famous verses of scripture in it, it wouldn’t get much screen time at all. It’s like the stepchild of the LDS scriptures. This stepchild is proving to be highly problematic, however. The discovery of the

Rosetta Stone and subsequent translation was completed in 1822. Although Joseph Smith would be oblivious to the ramifications, modern scholars are now adept at understanding the Egyptian language and related facsimiles. Because of this, The Book of Abraham translation isn't just a rock in my sack of problems with the church. It is a boulder!

Why is there an agreement with LDS and non-LDS scholars alike that there is no mention of Abraham or anything to do with Abraham on the remaining fragments? Why did the church change their narrative about the scrolls and mummies to be a vehicle for inspiration and revelation instead of a literal translation (the same narrative that is increasingly being proposed for The Book of Mormon as well)? Why is the alphabet Joseph produced completely wrong? Why do the facsimiles and the translations of them not agree at all with what they really represent? Why would these scrolls just be common funerary text? Why would the church admit to as much in their essay? Why would Joseph's ability to translate be highly suspect after the Kinderhook plates were proven to be a forgery? Why would many of the scientific and astronomical explanations not measure up to our current understanding?

Why is it that every time there is a problem with difficult questions like this that it always boils down to feelings and faith instead of facts and science? Why can this same process for maintaining faith in Mormonism be applicable to Scientology, Jehovahs Witnesses, Catholicism or fill-in-the-blank religion?

The Book of Mormon

I freely admit that I love The Book of Mormon. I love the stories of the stripping warriors of Helaman. I love Captain Moroni, Nephi, Alma, Ammon, and all the rest. I love the doctrines taught of mercy overpowering justice, of weak things becoming strong, of building your foundation on Christ and a thousand more.

Even now, after my "faith crisis", I love many parts of the book. I still believe it contains many truths! I still find value in its pages. I always felt that an evil person(s) wouldn't or couldn't produce such a thing. I have changed my life (for the better I think) because of it, and there are countless examples of others doing the same. Much of the book is still a mystery to me of how it came to be.

However, just like everything else about Joseph Smith and the church, there are just too many problems to ignore.

Why would Moroni, Nephi and all the other authors of the book go through all the trouble they did if the plates were never even used in the translation process? Why would the church depict the translation process the way it does (Joseph carefully using the plates with a curtain separating whoever was the scribe at the time) instead of showing Joseph's head buried in his hat looking at his peep-stone? How could the plates contain 1,300-2,000 type-written pages worth of information? How could the brass plates contain the writings of Moses and Isaiah if they hadn't even been compiled yet, let alone translated into Egyptian from their Hebrew origins? Why would there be copied chapters of the specific version of the Bible that was the same as the Bible in Joseph Smith's possession? Why would these copied chapters contain the same errors? Why would Joseph Smith change parts of these verses in his corrected JST version of the Bible but have the "incorrect" version in the Book of Mormon? Why are there so many anachronisms in the book? Why is there not a shred of "reformed Egyptian" to be found anywhere? Why is there a lack of archeological, linguistic, and historical evidence to support the book? Why, if two separate battles were fought at the Hill Cumorah with hundreds of thousands (and millions if you count the Jaredites) of people killed would there not be evidence of that? Why would apologists have to propose a separate location for the hill entirely or a shrinking cross section of a population to try to explain the disconnects? Why would God allow multiples of ancient biblical records to be found and verified but not do the same for the BOM, especially with such fantastic claims as to its origin? Why are there so many books that Joseph Smith would have had access to that contain many of the concepts, phrases, doctrines and other similarities of the BOM? Why are some of these similarities so glaring that a prior church historian admitted to it being problematic? Why have there been changes made to the book, and I'm not talking about spelling, grammar and punctuation here? Why does the DNA of American Indians not trace back to Jewish and middle eastern origins to the point where the church changed the title page to the BOM? Why did prophets and apostles tell specific groups of people that they are Lamanite descendants when their DNA shows other origins as well? Why, if the BOM was primarily written FOR the Lamanites, do we not have a clue as to who those people are now (many

Native Americans understandably resent their cultures being hijacked and retold through a Lamanite narrative, especially now). Why were the witnesses chosen for the BOM so completely unreliable? Their testimony would never be admissible in our courts of law because of how they changed so radically with various versions over time (a recurring problem as you study church history). Why, after everything it took to produce The Book of Mormon, not to mention it being divine scripture, did Joseph Smith try to sell the copyright? Why is the book so racially charged and divisive? Why does it read like a 19th century work?

Joseph Smith

My view of Joseph Smith is complicated. I'm sure much of that view is because I have listened to faith promoting stories and read similar books about him for over 20 years. My life experiences also undoubtedly project what I think of him.

For example, I had a missionary that I served with that I became very close to. I grew to love him like a brother. Over time, we would share increasingly personal things. This missionary eventually confided in me that he had been visited by his brother (who had died previously) along with having visitations from ancient prophets from the BOM and the Bible. I felt the spirit when he shared these things. I was jealous but believing. After all, here I was on a mission testifying to similar miraculous things. In time, however, I came to discover that this missionary was a habitual liar. He could make stuff up as fast as he could talk, and he could do it in a believable and charismatic way. Much of what I feel about that experience has translated to how I feel about Joseph Smith.

I'll share another example: For some reason, I am drawn to a series of television shows called "American Greed". In these episodes, example after example is showcased of people who have been duped by Ponzi schemes, frauds, swindles and scams, even though they were so confident in who/what they were investing in. I can't help but see these similarities with Joseph Smith and the church.

I'm sure many in the church felt scammed during the Kirtland era after the bank failed. Many of the church members lost their shirt financially. After all, here was a prophet endorsing these bank notes and investments. It also begs the question why so many of Joseph's other prophecies never came to pass, but I digress...

I'm sure that my own marriage, children, family life, etc. also project my feelings about Joseph as well. My relationship with Heather is projected on how I view his marriage to Emma.

I have come to realize that I can't excuse a lot of Joseph Smith's behavior. However, I believe there is good in everyone and that everyone has unique gifts and talents along with also having unique temptations and struggles. I try not to judge others and I try to give others the benefit of the doubt. I can't even begin to fathom what it would be like to lose a child, let alone multiple children. I can't imagine what it would be like to experience many of the things Joseph did. I can only imagine what that could do to one's mental state as well. I'd probably be a basket case! Despite his failings, it is also ridiculous to ignore many of the good things about his life and what he was able to accomplish. His legacy is nothing short of remarkable!

After all I have experienced and learned about the church and about Joseph Smith, my simplified conclusion is that he was a master of pulling things from his experiences and surroundings. Whether he came up with the BOM himself or the whole thing was one massive undertaking with multiple participants from the beginning, I don't know. For me, however, it is impossible to overlook the similarities of other books he would have had access to and the BOM. I don't believe that exact sections of his particular version of the Bible ending up in the BOM were a coincidence either. Borrowing from the Masons to come up with the temple endowment is another example. And his JST translation of the Bible is yet another highly suspected plagiarism (how ironic that this discovery came from an undergraduate student at BYU). All this stuff was right in his own backyard...

Were his motives sinister and ulterior, or did he really believe in what he was doing? Was he a liar like my missionary buddy was? Was "lying for the Lord" (where positive outcomes of behavior and faith justify dishonesty... like telling kids to be good for Santa Claus) a motivating factor here? Did things start out legitimately and then turn South, or was the whole thing a sham from the beginning that eventually even he bought into? Who knows? Joseph is reported to have said "You don't know me. No man knows my history. I cannot tell it. I shall never undertake it. I don't blame anyone for not believing my history".

I couldn't agree more. And, with where I am at now, I don't think God can blame me for not believing anymore either.

Various Versions of the First Vision

I was completely clueless that there were multiple versions of the first vision until a few months before my "faith transition". There are at least nine different variations, although only one (the 1832 version) is in Joseph's own hand writing. I had no idea about the way the story changed over time and how crazy the differences were. I must have taught the Pearl of Great Price version of the first vision thousands of times on my mission. That version bears little resemblance to the 1832 account. To me, it has been yet another example of dishonesty on the part of the church and why my pancake looks and tastes nothing like the ones my dad makes. Why would they keep differing versions locked away for decades? Why, if it is something that the church hinges on according to President Hinkley, was it never even known about until years and years after the church was even organized (the official account wasn't printed until 1842, and before that publication, there is no mention of it from the membership).

Even though we don't know who it was for certain, it is a pretty safe assumption that Joseph Fielding Smith, when acting as the church historian, cut the 1832 version out of Joseph Smith's journal and kept it hidden away, only to tape it back in after word leaked of its existence and people came requesting access. Look for yourself at the Joseph Smith papers project. I'll provide a link at the end as well. Interestingly enough, in my own personal missionary journals, I taped the pages together that shared my experience of my missionary buddy saying he had been angelically visited by his deceased brother and multiple ancient prophets. Why did I do this? Because it was embarrassing to me and I didn't want other people to read it. Additionally, I would know if anyone had read it because the tape would be ripped or altered. I find this similarity very telling. It is a natural human reaction to try to hide embarrassing events from one's past. I can certainly empathize with whoever it was that cut those pages out of Joseph Smith's journal...

I have read the church essay trying to smooth over the multiple first vision accounts. The problem for me continues in the timeline Joseph Smith grew and

evolved in his understanding of the Godhead. His differing accounts changed along with his preaching, not to mention the prevailing understanding of the time. Look at how he describes the Godhead in the Book of Mormon (think Abinadi's description) and his Lectures on Faith compared to the particular first vision account in the historical timeline, for example. The version that is in Joseph's own handwriting is vastly different from the one contained in The Pearl of Great Price. From a common-sense perspective, I can't, for the life of me, imagine having an experience like that and not being able to get the basic details right EVERY TIME. I'm sorry, but it just doesn't add up, at least not for me.

Why were the Lectures on Faith removed from the D&C? After all, those lectures are the reason why it is called the DOCTRINE and covenants in the first place. Look at how God is described in these lectures, especially the fifth. Of course they had to be removed!

I have read the apologist excuses for the various versions of the first vision. I'm just not buying what they are selling. Would these differing versions hold up in a police interview or be admissible in our courts of law? I doubt it...

Blacks and the Priesthood

This problem is ugly and messy. It starts when anyone reads The Book of Mormon because they will find an underlying theme taught that skin color was a direct result of wickedness and righteousness; that the darker skin was a curse from God to separate the Nephites from the Lamanites. There have also been changes made to the book over time to try to soften that tone.

Priesthood in the church already has a suspect beginning. Why? Because for such an important and defining event in the history of the church, there is absolutely no mention of it (even to Joseph Smith's own family) for five years after it supposedly occurred. Five years! It was never in the original Book of Commandments either. There is no mention of it in any journal, letter, or any printed material until the mid-1830s. And just like Joseph Smith's multiple first vision accounts, Oliver Cowdrey gives multiple accounts which are not consistent in the details either. There were also many members of the church from the

beginning who questioned the validity and the purpose of the priesthood and resented the changes made to the D&C.

To confuse the issue even further, Joseph Smith gave the priesthood to African Americans in his day. However, Brigham Young did not. And all the prophets and apostles until Spencer W. Kimball subscribed to the same doctrine of dark-skinned people being less valiant in the pre-existence and were consequently denied the priesthood ordination. Current prophets and the church essay have basically thrown older prophets under the bus with this issue. The conundrum is obvious. Either members are expected to follow and believe what prophets have to say as being the undisputed will of the Lord, or prophets can still be wrong. In this case, according to the church essay, they are not only admitting that they were wrong, but that every single prophet since Joseph Smith was wrong for the next 150ish years.

Additionally, I will assume that a lot of members feel like I used to in that prophets and apostles are special witnesses of Christ; they walk with him, talk with him, and have special communion with him. It makes one wonder if that is indeed the case if problems like this can go on for as long as they did without correction. Now, if something is taught that a member doesn't agree with, it will be easier to think that prophets might be getting it wrong again. Do you think the LGBTQ community thinks the prophets are inspired in their current stance? What about women who feel they should have the priesthood and a greater role in the operations of the church? And the trifecta is the "intellectuals". But what about the day-to-day members like me that can see the disconnect here (no, I'm not an intellectual, as anyone who knows me can attest. I went to USU, I push buttons and flip switches for a living, and I like books with lots of pictures. Unless, perhaps, Elder Packer's definition of an "intellectual" is anyone who reads and thinks about things that don't necessarily come from Deseret Book or LDS.org)?

This disconnect also surfaces when the track record of these prophets is looked at over the years. Why do you think the church has distanced itself from Bruce R. McConkie's "Mormon Doctrine", "The Journal of Discourses", Brigham Young's Adam-God doctrine or a host of other teachings? Brigham taught that people are living on the sun and moon for crying out loud! How about the teaching that polygamy was a literal REQUIREMENT for the celestial kingdom and that the wives

of those who didn't practice it would be given to someone else? For a God who is the same yesterday, today and forever, He sure changes His mind a lot, and His church sure changes a lot as well. Think about how much the church has changed just in your own lifetime. What about the doctrines surrounding cremation, birth control, women working outside the home, the causes of homosexuality, reasons for excommunication, take your pick...?

The leaders of the church are obviously human. They make mistakes. I can't expect anything less. But what have they prophesied? What scripture has been added (I used to feel The Proclamation to the Family qualified, but learning the process and history of how that came to be has frustrated that assumption for me as well)? What have they translated? Joseph Smith never finished his translation of the Bible. Why not start there? What have they revealed? How do they compare to the prophets and apostles of the Bible? I grew up loving these men. For the most part, I still think they are good, honorable, and spiritual people. I think they are doing the best they can. However, once again, they have not lived up to my expectations of what a prophet is and what a prophet does.

How I wish the prophets could have been at the forefront of the civil rights movement instead of the rear of the pack! I wish the prophets could have led the charge with the ERA. Why is it that the prophets seem to be reactive to social justice issues instead of prophetically proactive? Why does it often seem like people get excommunicated for speaking out and raising awareness to various problematic aspects of the church, then when changes are subsequently made in these areas it is considered revelation? And wouldn't it have been awesome if the brethren would have called out Mark Hoffman for being the fraud that he was (like what happens in The Book of Mormon) instead of getting a black eye of suspicion on their prophetic mantle, especially when the Tanners (famous anti-Mormons) were doing just that!?

MY PERSONAL PROBLEMS WITH THE CHURCH

So never mind all the "facts" and the theories and the research and the arguments for and against the church for a minute. The critics and the apologists

go round and round and the rabbit holes just multiply into infinity. The exercise is exhausting and can turn people off on both sides anyway. What happens when you step away from all of that and simply apply the litmus test of personal observation and experience? What if this is the ONLY thing one uses to determine the “truthfulness” or validity of the church in their life? What are some of the personal reasons why I would feel the need to literally have to protect my family from some of Mormonism’s continued influences?

(May I interject here again and say that this section is probably going to come across as me being angry and negative and “anti” again. If I’m angry, it’s because my whole blasted life church has been an agonizing three hours long, and the year I drop my bag of rocks it goes down to two! Don’t tell me everyone isn’t ecstatic about this change either. All joking aside, I’ve tried not to be angry and bitter with the church. It’s not productive. In addition, there are TONS of things I love about the church. Just hear me out or skip to the next section of what I love about the church if you don’t want to read the negative. Additionally, many of my complaints stem from human failings and from rigid orthodoxy that harms when things are taken to extremes. I just feel that in many instances, the dynamics of the church exasperate these problems.)

Probably first and foremost in my mind is the guilt. I experienced it for the first real time on my mission, and I have witnessed it many times since. For some people who can’t process it effectively, it can be debilitating and even deadly (look at the rash of suicides from members of the church and the reasons why they did it if you think I’m being overly dramatic here). I will give a few examples:

One of my mission presidents was an ex-army drill instructor. How do you think this mentality works with Mormon dynamics? He ran the mission like it was his own army unit. He demanded complete obedience, and every week it seemed as though a new mission rule was being introduced. The list of rules reminded me of how the law of Moses must have felt from Old Testament days. He sent many missionaries home. The demand of exact obedience became increasingly difficult and unrealistic for me. If I would have internalized a lack of success or a lack of feeling the spirit to messing up on a mission rule, it would have been a spiraling decline of self-defeating behavior.

Guilt isn't limited to missionaries. How many times do regular members feel that they aren't good enough; that they aren't doing enough, praying enough, reading the scriptures enough, going to the temple enough, being a good enough husband and father/wife and mother, being "perfect" enough? Practically every week a message from the pulpit can be internalized as something you need to be doing better. We have all witnessed the reasons and the pressures for the "Molly Mormon and Patty Perfect" stereotype. And when some members are struggling and needing help, all too often the message circles back to something they are not doing; that they are the reason why things aren't working out. They are the reason why their kids are rebelling, why their marriage is failing, why their prayers are continuing unanswered, why their individual shortcomings aren't being resolved. They need to pray more, do more, have more faith, be more devoted...

What happens when priesthood blessings and promises don't materialize? Once again, it will circle back on the individuals. Either the one giving the blessing messed up or the recipient doesn't have sufficient faith. Either that or mental gymnastics need to be employed to make the blessing fit reality (kinda the same process of what would always happen after one of Joseph's many gold-digging expeditions). And as a side note, even though there are countless examples and testimonies of priesthood blessings and other miracles in the church, other people in other religions seem to often have miracles and blessings in their lives as well, but they don't have the priesthood??? How can this be?

Consider the person who takes Moroni's promise to heart and prays to know if the Book of Mormon is true. If they get no answer it isn't because the book is false. It's because they didn't do it right! They didn't have enough faith. They didn't read enough. They didn't pray enough. It always comes back on them. What happens if the answer comes back that the book is false? Well, they've obviously been deceived. Either that or they haven't read or prayed enough or had enough faith. And we go round and round and round...

What about the youth that struggles with masturbation? The spouse that has divorced? The gay and lesbian? The member who battles with depression and mental illness? The list goes on for members of the church who will beat themselves up over a failure to measure up. Is it a coincidence that Utah has such a high rate of suicide? Is it a coincidence that so many members of the church are

prescribed anti-depressants? Is it a coincidence that Utah ranked the highest as far as pornography subscriptions in a Harvard Business School study?

For me, personally, I'm not surprised by any of the statistics. If I were Gay and Mormon, I imagine I would feel broken, worthless, confused, and an outcast. I could easily see how a divorcee could feel like a failure and that their quest for the celestial kingdom was off track. If I couldn't process guilt, I think I would be completely depressed and beaten down. And if the Harvard study is legitimate, for a myriad of reasons I could see why LDS members would increasingly turn to porn.

Have you ever wondered if you were "good enough" to make it to the Celestial kingdom? This struggle to be "good enough" often translates into incredible hypocrisy and fakeness as some members do everything they can to portray an aura of perfection in their public life while privately it is a rotten, crumbling mess. I realize that this is a common human frailty. Again, my point here is that the church dynamics can exacerbate this problem (in addition, I think the church itself has fallen victim to this. They have taught a rosy, whitewashed "perfected" version that returns to bite them when the real truth comes out. I am hoping that the leadership is beginning to realize that people don't like their pancakes burned to a crisp on one side and gooey on the other! The transparency of the Joseph Smith papers is a step in the right direction, but they still have a long way to go...).

Despite the doctrine of the grace of Christ that is taught in the church, for many members it is about working hard enough and being good enough for their entrance to the celestial kingdom. For many, it is an exhausting and unobtainable exercise of continually adding balls to the juggling act of futility. In my opinion, grace is downplayed in the church. It is deemphasized and misunderstood. "Amazing Grace" and similar hymns are conspicuously absent from our hymnals. Why do you suppose that is? I invite you to watch one of the best talks I have ever heard on the subject given by Brad Wilcox at a BYU devotional entitled "His Grace is Sufficient" (I will provide a link at the end). Stephen Robinson's book "Believing Christ" is another powerful explanation as well.

Members of the church are taught to use the spirit of discernment to guide them in their daily lives, especially after receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost after baptism. This only works as long as there isn't anything that disagrees with the

church or its leaders. Once again, it always swings back on the individual being wrong if their discernment runs contrary. The concept that Joseph might have been dead wrong about polygamy, the Book of Abraham translation, or a host of other things becomes unchallengeable. Openly challenging our current leaders puts one on the fast track to excommunication, even if something they have said or done is proven false. Look up the recent experience of Bill Reel and the historical example of William Law. These are only a few examples of many.

The same “obvious” conclusion is made by remaining members of the church toward anyone like me who has become disaffected. Their discernment is right. Mine is obviously wrong. Additionally, there is always some aspect of the gospel that I just don’t understand if this is the conclusion I have reached. If only I would read the scriptures more or pray more or have more faith. If only I would read fill-in-the-blank book or listen to Elder so-and-so’s conference talk... The problem is never with the church or its doctrine or its leaders. It is always on the individual.

One of today’s foremost LDS authors, Terryl and Fiona Givens, wrote a thought-provoking book called “The Crucible of Doubt”. The beginning of this book presents a concept of people who come to erroneous conclusions because they are asking the wrong questions in their quest for truth. The analogy is given of a house with a door that had a secret lock to guard the riches beyond. The regular keyhole was simply a decoy, and anyone who tried to open the door by using that keyhole to pick the lock or force their way would be frustrated in the fruitless attempt. The real keyhole was ingeniously hidden in a different part of the door. This analogy, of course, is coming from their viewpoint and assumption of the church being true. The irony here is that maybe, just maybe, for some people in their journey of faith, Mormonism is the decoy keyhole that one will forever struggle with in vain while the elusive hidden keyhole is something else. Perhaps Mormonism can simultaneously be the hidden keyhole that brings some people closer to God while yoga, Buddhism, Catholicism, Judaism, Hinduism, Confucianism, the absence of organized religion, or whatever is that secret keyhole for others?

I have a brother who has never really believed in the church or the church’s traditional concept of God and Christ. He has always been loved and accepted in

our family, but I know he has also struggled with feeling broken and inferior. He was the only brother (out of five, along with three sisters who also served) to not serve a mission. He was the “black sheep” for years that didn’t fit in because everyone else had a testimony. He was always “wrong”. I remember, after he successfully battled Leukemia, thinking that perhaps it was Gods way of teaching him lessons that he needed to learn in his life and that maybe he would be “compelled to be humble” and return to the fold. My respect for him being true to himself, despite the pressure from all sides to conform, has grown immeasurably, especially now! The mental image it gives me is a square wooden peg trying to be forced into a round hole with a hammer. What damage gets done to that wooden peg in the process? What about the frustration and exhaustion and exasperation of the ones wielding the hammer?

And as a side observation, my brother seems genuinely happy. He is a productive member of society. He is fun to hang out with. He is a good man and I look up to him and love him and respect him for a plethora of reasons. How did he turn out this way without the church? I am the better-looking one, though, so perhaps that was the natural byproduct?

My next complaint is the lack of use of the Bible. Mormons have been taught to mistrust the Bible. It is one of the core articles of faith. Before, I could imagine incompetent translators or people with their own agendas altering the texts. Who knows? That may still be the case. All I know is that it gets used and quoted a fraction of the times of the other LDS scriptures. If I were a Bible-thumping evangelist, I could certainly appreciate the claim that Mormons have distanced themselves from the Bible. For many, The Book of Mormon has become a replacement Bible. Additionally, because of the emphasized teachings from the Book of Mormon, I can appreciate the viewpoint that others have that Mormons believe they are saved by works more than grace.

My next issue is the temple. To begin with, I find it supremely ironic that one of the temple recommend questions is if you are honest in your dealings with your fellow man, given the church’s track record on the subject, and that me honestly answering the recommend questions disqualifies me from temple attendance. Looking back, it was as though the temple experience for me was a completely different religion than how I had been raised my entire life to that point. I have

come to personally wish the endowment didn't even exist. The initial shock of the endowment ceremony wore off for me over time, but it has always made me uneasy and uncomfortable. When I would look in the mirror dressed in the temple clothes, I always felt weird! I can only imagine how much worse it would have been for me had I experienced the throat-slitting and disemboweling enactments for revealing the signs and tokens, the "oath of vengeance", the five points of fellowship, or the litany of other changes that used to be part of the endowment ceremony. Speaking of changes, why were surveys sent out before these changes were made? I thought the endowment was based on revelation, not public opinion?

When I learned about the similarities to Masonry (Joseph became a Master Mason in March of 1842 and introduced the endowment in May of the same year, not to mention multitudes of family members and associates being Masons as well) the many changes that have been made to the endowment and initiatory and the ceremony of the second anointing that has been kept secret from all but the highest levels of church membership, it just doesn't sit well with me. I love the doctrine of eternal marriage and eternal families. I love the peace and beauty and feelings of the celestial room. I love those parts of the temple. But having a bunch of signs and tokens and secret handshakes is silly in how I view my relationship with God (not to mention these secrets are available to anyone curious enough to put in a simple internet search).

I love learning about and respecting our ancestors and lineage but trying to link them all together and seal them properly seems like a complete waste of time to me now. It quickly becomes a tangled mess, even for current living relationships! And now that I find myself unable to attend my own daughter's wedding (I have stopped paying my tithing and wearing the garment, not to mention my lack of testimony in much of the church and I refuse to lie during the recommend interview just to get it renewed for the wedding), I have come to truly resent the temple. Something that should be celebrated and witnessed by friends and family alike should not be shut away to only the exclusive club of "worthy" recommend holders (some people I have talked to feel like tithing being a requirement for attending a temple wedding is a form of extortion). What about my younger children? I'm sure they would love to witness their sister's wedding! Too bad they don't have a recommend either. For a church that has such an

emphasis on family, for many it does just the opposite. Some countries won't recognize a temple wedding. In those cases, the wedding is performed separately from the sealing. There are obviously different ways this can be handled. Why does the church need to inflict unnecessary pain to so many in this regard?

(I am going to interject a little "gee whiz" tidbit here. In the original 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, there was a section (101) that dealt with marriage. Among other things, it says "...all marriages in this church of Christ of Latter Day Saints, should be solemnized in a public meeting, or feast, prepared for that purpose ...Marriage should be celebrated with prayer and thanksgiving. ...Inasmuch as this church of Christ has been reproached with the crime of fornication, and polygamy: we declare that we believe, that one man should have one wife; and one woman, but one husband, except in case of death, when either is at liberty to marry again".

This section was eventually removed in its entirety, and what we have now is our current section 132; the same section that has teachings that President Hinckley said are "not doctrinal". All of this is yet another reason why I have such a scorched pancake right now. Have I made myself clear that I don't agree with how marriages are handled in the church and that I resent not being able to attend my own daughter's wedding? Good, then let's continue...)

Next on my list is the time commitment. In many instances I see a disconnect from what is taught and what is practiced. I see members spending tremendous amounts of time away from their families, busily attending to the myriad of duties required of the church. For some, I see meetings piled upon meetings and programs piled upon programs. For someone who thinks they are being more righteous the harder they work and the more time they devote to the church, it is easy to see where it becomes problematic. Besides, there aren't enough hours in a month to do everything required of the church in a week (therefore, for some people, heap on more of that guilt...).

Right behind the complaint of time is the complaint of money. It can be argued that the definition of tithing has been made up or changed over time. Some will say that the verses in Malachi have been twisted from their intent. Others have also argued that the original doctrine was to pay 10% of your increase, after the needs of your family were taken care of. Regardless of these arguments, I don't

agree with paying the church if you can't even provide for your own family. I don't agree with the poverty of so many going to support a church that is so obscenely wealthy. I don't agree with the billions upon billions invested in the stock market, land, real estate, and other ventures. I don't agree with the church keeping its finances secret. I certainly don't agree with the church spending 1.5-3 billion on a shopping mall. And when you do the math of how much the church spends to help others and relieve suffering compared to the wealth it possesses, the amount is embarrassingly small. The riches of the church are spent to build and maintain churches and extravagant temples and to run the massive corporation that it is, but I have to question if that is what Christ would want if he were really at the head?

What about the examples of some professors at BYU being forced out for teaching things contrary to the church or not maintaining a temple recommend? Or institute teachers getting the boot if they get a divorce? There is little tolerance or individual discretion when it comes to protecting the image the church wants to portray. Said another way, the church will do everything in its power to project a specific image, even at the expense of individual members.

Another problem I see with the church is the problems that can arise with priesthood males exercising "unrighteous dominion". It's a thing... and although my own father and most other men in the church I know have been awesome, I have seen it enough to admit it can be a problem. Once again, the church dynamics can really exacerbate this problem. The roles of women in the church can easily be construed as inferior. I invite you to read the blog of Amy McPhie Allebest where she shares her "Dear Mormon Man, Tell Me What You Would Do". Since I am male, I can't empathize with much of her complaint, but it is certainly eye-opening. This church (like many other religions and cultural practices) originated from a male-dominated patriarchy. The ramifications of which continue to reverberate.

Unrighteous dominion shares the table with the dangerous teaching of supporting and sustaining the leaders of the church, regardless. It is blindly accepting and following. It is the idolizing of the prophet, apostles and others. It is not being able to step away from a situation and recognizing abuse when it is occurring. When an organization is set up the way the church is, where the leaders are

viewed and idolized as being holy, spiritual, practically infallible, revelatory, etc., it is ripe for the possibility of abuse. Why do you think it was so easy for a prior MTC president to sexually exploit some of the sister missionaries under his charge? There are plenty of other examples as well. Spiritual abuse can be as damaging as sexual, physical, or any other form of abuse, too.

Rigid obedience is another struggle I have with the church. Keeping all the commandments is emphasized throughout the teachings of the church. For example, in the temple endowment (before it changed again and they got rid of the movie), Adam made a sacrificial altar because of obedience, even though he didn't understand the purpose. In other words, the more obedient you are, the more righteous you must be, even if you don't agree with or understand the purpose of whatever command is given. Of course, I agree with keeping the commandments and being obedient. I just see problems when it is taken to extremes. I think this is especially problematic with our missionaries. Let me give an example to explain:

On my mission, I had the privilege of getting to know a single woman who happened to live next door to me in one of my areas. She was a member of the church and would often have my companion and I over for dinner. She was born with multiple handicaps and deformities. She has no muscles in her upper arm and would move them by swinging her torso. She also has limited mobility and a host of other health problems. We had scores of opportunities to help and serve her. Her example of faith and her humor and attitude in the face of such incredible difficulties has always been humbling and inspiring to me. She taught me many life lessons simply by my association with her. We became good friends, and I have kept in touch with her ever since I returned from my mission. I was so disappointed to hear that missionaries don't even come by her apartment anymore and haven't for years. They aren't allowed to. She is a single woman. Never mind that she is old enough to be their grandma. Rules are rules. What a ridiculous travesty for her and for the missionaries as well!

How many mission rules have been added over the years, rules that have absolutely nothing to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ? These rules control every minute of their entire lives! When to wake up, what they can do with members, how much e-mail time is allowed, the music they can listen to, if

earbuds are allowed, and on and on and on. When I take a step back to observe, I see a church who has had missionaries that represent it do dumb things (on my mission we used to joke that "...the church HAS to be true, because if it wasn't, missionaries would have ruined it long ago"). In hyper "knee jerk" reactions, rules get imposed to try to prevent repeated occurrences. There have undoubtedly been lawsuits somewhere in the mix as well. I increasingly view all these mission rules as an attempt at universal control and order and less at individuality and common sense. I also view them as measures that a giant corporation would take to protect itself. I have witnessed enough of this phenomenon over the years to have serious reservations about wanting my own children to serve. That, along with my daughter getting married was what ultimately led to my current dilemma with the church. Even if I had a raging testimony of the truthfulness of the gospel, I would still have serious reservations about sending my kids into the Law of Moses, guilt-producing scenario of exact mission rule obedience.

What about the missionary who gets sent home early and the stigma associated with that? You and I both know about the assumptions that will be made as to why. He or she will be carrying around their own Scarlet Letter just like Hester Prynne. Either that or they didn't have a strong enough testimony, or they have mental problems or whatever. Who would want to marry or associate with someone like that? What about the guilt that is almost certain to accompany such a return? Our church culture can be devastating to some who fail in the expected standards.

Next is the lack of focus on Christ. I know the church has tried desperately to try to bring that focus back. It has changed the font of the church to emphasize Christ. Most recently they have emphasized not using the term "Mormon" anymore. I know Christ is taught and loved in the LDS church. I just see a disconnect between what also happens a lot of the time. I can go to church and be taught about missionary work, food storage, temple work, tithing, home and visiting teaching, pornography, and scores of other distractors without hardly a mention of Christ sometimes. Additionally, with the ratio of use of the Book of Mormon compared to the Bible, I must wonder sometimes if some members don't know more about the journeys of Nephi and Lehi than they do about the life and ministry of Jesus Christ? Why couldn't we get the name of the church right the first time? Why wasn't Christ even included in the name of the church

before? And why are Mormons known the world over as Mormons instead of Christians? I'm glad the church is trying to rebrand itself. I think it's a step in the right direction.

Sexuality is my next complaint with the church. This is only my opinion, but I feel like there is a lopsided emphasis of purity for the women of the church compared to the boys and men. For example, women are the ones getting the constant message to dress modestly, not visa versa. How about the lessons of passing around the cupcake with the licked frosting or the gum that has already been chewed? The never-ending emphasis on virtue and abstinence for the women while the men are equally bombarded about the evils of pornography. The message constantly comes across as "SEX IS BAD, SEX IS BAD, SEX IS BAD"!!! Very rarely have I witnessed sex-positive messages. It is one of those subjects that just isn't talked about or emphasized. Is it any wonder that many marriages struggle with the "good girl/boy syndrome" and other sexual dysfunctions that can stem from LDS upbringing? What about the youth that can't take the sacrament or is told to postpone their mission because they masturbate? Or what about the previous teaching that masturbation leads to homosexuality? Why is it that 99.9999% of boys do it or have done it (I can't speak for girls, but I bet it's pretty high) and it is accepted as normal and healthy by practically everyone outside of the church, yet it gets such a stigma in the church? Why is polygamy still taught as a true doctrine? And, let's face it, even though they don't go down to your ankles like they used to, the temple garments for many couples are very unflattering and anti-sexual. Just sayin'.

For that matter, why on earth in today's day and age, do we still have youth talking about sexual matters behind closed doors alone with a bishop? The Boy Scouts and other organizations have adopted a two-person policy to prevent abuse. There are cases of abuse in our own church and all over the news in other churches. I realize that most members of the church are good and honorable. My current bishop is one of my closest friends and is one of the best persons I have ever known. I wish every bishop could be as good as him, and I seriously feel sorry for whoever will take his place. However, I still don't want him asking sexual questions to my kids behind closed doors. The way we go about worthiness interviews is completely wrong in my opinion. I remember those embarrassingly

uncomfortable interviews I had with my bishop when I was a youth. And yes, I lied to him when he asked me if I had ever masturbated...

Since we are talking about sex, let's talk about the LGBTQ issue. From a doctrinal standpoint, it is obvious why the church is so opposed to the movement. I personally don't understand the cross these people have had to bear as they struggle with the disconnect between how they feel and what the church teaches, but I know the basic human need of loving and being loved is universal. That's how we are made. I can't fault them for wanting that for themselves any more than I could fault President Nelson for marrying again even after he had clearly "filled all the squares" required for the highest degree of the celestial kingdom. Refusing baptism for children of gay parents, proposition 8 and other political wrangling make it seem like the church is at war with the community. I try to imagine how I would feel if I were a gay person listening to one of the many talks recently by Elder Oaks, for example. I know the church teaches love and acceptance of everyone; to "love the sinner and hate the sin". What is practiced and what is preached or the overall message that is received is oftentimes very separate things when it comes to this issue. For me, personally, the policy that the children of gay parents are denied baptism is anything but prophetic and revelatory. It flies in the face of my personal understanding of the gospel. I thought Christ said to "...suffer the little children and forbid them not"? I thought the gift of the Holy Ghost was the most important gift we could ever receive in our lives? I thought that man will be punished for their own sins and not for Adam's transgression? Do I support and sustain the leaders of the church in this "revealed" position? Most emphatically, NO! I do not. And, just like the discriminatory history of Blacks and the priesthood, I can't wait for the new revelation that will undo the mistake of the old revelation here.

Since I brought up the LGBTQ issue, my next complaint stems from the reaction I see from members to this and a host of other perceived shortcomings. Members of the church, myself included, can be incredibly judgmental. It is easy for some to feel that they are superior to others. It is easy to feel that you have the truth and that everyone else is just a little more lacking. It is easy to feel like you are more righteous or holy. It is easy to shun and outcast others who don't fit the mold. Sometimes I felt as though not drinking alcohol and smoking was the most important commandment ever decreed from the heavens (have you ever felt like

you belonged to The Church of The Word of Wisdom instead of The Church of Jesus Christ sometimes? I know I sure have). Having a cup of coffee would be as egregious as who knows what. Heaven help you if you have a tattoo or (gasp) multiple piercings! How many times have you seen kids forbidden to play with other kids who weren't members of the church? I know being judgmental is a universal human failing and something that everyone struggles with in one way or another. I just see a lot of it in the church.

Perhaps that judgmental attitude is what overflows at times when people leave the church. I have heard of spouses leaving the marriage, parents disowning their children and children disowning their parents, jobs being lost, friendships destroyed, and people ostracized. Like an indiscriminate tornado, this church leaves a wake of destruction for some of these members! (Fortunately, for the most part, this has not been the case with me. My parents and family still talk to me and love me. My (true) friends are still my friends. My wife has not left me. I have felt a non-judgmental response from most. My feelings toward the church would probably be very different right now if their responses were not Christlike. So, if any of my family or friends are reading this: THANK YOU AND I LOVE YOU!)

How many times have you witnessed the heroism and courage demonstrated by those who have converted to the Mormon church from other religions and walks of life? They are praised and their stories are emphasized if they were persecuted, disowned, or if they had to make significant sacrifices. The greater the trial and personal sacrifice the better. How strange it is, the reaction that follows anyone who leaves the LDS church; when the shoe is on the other foot. They are shamed and judged as being wrong, lost, deceived, dark, etc.

Why do you think people leave the church? Surveys have shown that most people who leave the church do so because of problems with history, doctrines, not feeling spiritually edified, etc. If you are reading this and think the reason why someone left is because they got offended by someone or because you think they want to sin or take the easy road, I would challenge you to research the issue instead of just projecting personal assumptions. Deep down you might WANT those to be the primary reasons, but from my experience and what I have read and heard from so many others, for the most part that just isn't true. Many people who leave are more devoted, more studious, more faithful, more caring. I

challenge you to find one single historic example being taught by church curriculum of someone leaving for honest and legitimate reasons. Instead, the story will be told of hurt feelings over milk strippings or something else seemingly ridiculous. Why is it that people who leave their previous religions do so from a perceived position of honesty, integrity, truth-seeking and authenticity while that same logic doesn't apply to people who leave the Mormon church?

My "faith transition" as I like to call it now is usually referred to as a "faith crisis" or some other term with negative overtones and connotation; something that is connected to sadness and is depressing and embarrassing. Why is it, that despite the pain I experienced, I now personally consider this "transition" to be a tremendous blessing and eye-opening and enlightening experience in my life? Why do I feel an increase of tolerance and love for others, along with feeling greater inner happiness and joy? Why do I have a greater sense of satisfaction with my life? Why do I still feel like I have spiritual promptings and a connection to the divine like I did before? This can't be!

Excommunications in the church is my next disagreement. If I were asked to be a bishop, one of my caveats would have been that I would not be willing to excommunicate anyone or sit on a disciplinary council. I understand they are supposed to be done in love. I just don't agree with the practice or the way it is done in the church. Many who have been excommunicated in the past deserve an apology in my opinion. Additionally, many people today publicly empathize with issues that others in the past have been excommunicated for, me included. I suppose I am also in apostasy because I publicly disagree with some of the policies of the church and some of the teachings of the brethren. However, I have to wonder if Christ would have ever excommunicated anyone? Not only that, I bet Christ would have been excommunicated by the Scribes and Pharisees in his day for opposing their hypocrisy, self-righteousness, and faulty teachings.

I have learned to be very wary whenever I see a group or individual being elevated and touted as being better than others. History is rife with examples of abuse because of this. The holocaust is arguably the worst example in our recent memory. The hair on the back of my neck rises anytime I hear someone touting the same. I hear these ridiculous and absurd statements all the time: Southwest pilots are better than Delta pilots; Americans are better than Mexicans; Christians

are better than Muslims... The prideful comparisons are endless. I think red flags should be going off like crazy anytime one sees this happening. This does not exempt the church, whose doctrines are replete with teachings of being a "chosen generation", "youth of a noble birthright", a "chosen people", "God's covenant people", the only carriers of the priesthood, having the "fullness of the gospel" while everyone else is lacking, being the "one true church", etc.

My next struggle with the church is how testimonies are largely based on feelings and emotions. Is it healthy to base everything on feelings? Should feelings trump facts? Is it reasonable for feelings to be wrong sometimes? I felt the spirit as strong when my missionary buddy was lying to me as I have at other times of my life. What about the people who might "feel the spirit" watching violent movies like "Saving Private Ryan" or "Schindler's List" or attending an event that has nothing at all to do with church? How many of you felt the spirit during one of Paul H. Dunn's conference talks when he was lying to you about his personal experiences? Should feelings be the main thing we base our testimonies on? Why can people from other religions bear testimony to the truthfulness of their religion because of what they feel just like Mormons do? Why can people feel so strongly about what they believe that they can fly airplanes into buildings, drive trucks into crowds and detonate suicide vests? How much bloodshed has been caused through the ages in the name of religion? And why, if the LDS church is the ONLY true church on the face of the entire earth, is it limited to less than 1% of the population? God is pretty inefficient at getting his point across, especially if this life has such eternal significance. It just doesn't make sense.

Another problem I see is the emphasis on getting married and having children so young. Mormon courtships and engagements are famously short. Much of the time, things work out just fine, just like they do with arranged marriages of other cultures. But there are plenty of instances where the marriage turns into a complete train wreck! Red flags oftentimes get overlooked in the rush and maturity can be sorely lacking. Raging pent up hormones often cloud good judgement. I'll just leave it at that.

I know I talked about polygamy before. I think it deserves repeating here because the teaching and the skeletons from it continue in the church today. The doctrine of it has never been repealed. The way we deal with it is to not talk about it,

teach the subtle changes that have been made to the curriculum, turn a blind eye to the conundrums it produces, and to ultimately excommunicate anyone who practices it outside of the church (never mind that President Nelson and Oaks are current polygamists when you get right to it). We shrug our shoulders and say that the colossal mess of these sealings and relationships will ultimately be taken care of by God in the afterlife. The temple recently went through yet another series of changes to the endowment ceremony. Some of these changes have been directed at smoothing over some of the male-dominated overtones. Arguably, this shows that “progressive” changes can be made in the church. The brethren have completely disavowed the previous erroneous racial doctrines of the past. Why can't the doctrine of polygamy (and section 132 of the D&C for that matter) be relegated to the trash bin where it belongs as well? I see nothing but harm coming to my children by continuing to have them being taught the validity of the doctrine. And if you are Mormon and don't think polygamy is a continued doctrine of the church right now just because it isn't talked about or practiced, I would submit that you don't really know your religion. That burning smell is your pancake needing to be flipped...

Another problem that is often taken to extremes is the notion that extra blessings await those who sacrifice for the church. The greater the sacrifice, the greater the reward. We hail our pioneers and retell heroic stories of early saints. I used to be in awe of those who left their families to serve missions. But take a step back for a second... is that truly commendable? I had a nightmare once that was as real as life. In it, I was called to serve another mission for the church. I had two young daughters at the time and a career in the Air Force. It was a heart-wrenching and agonizing dilemma. It was my personal Abrahamic test! Every fiber of my being screamed “NO” but since I considered it a call from God, I knew my answer had to be yes. How relieved I was to wake up to a different reality. And before this experience gets dismissed, consider the covenant that is made in the temple to give everything to the church. EVERYTHING! After all, “a religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things, never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation”. What would you do if you were given a similar choice today and it wasn't a dream?

What motivates people? What are your reasons for doing the things you do? Ever since my “faith transition”, I have been more acutely aware of the fear and

worry-based motivations that paralyze some people. “If my kids aren’t raised in the church they will go off the deep end” is a common one (because we all know LDS kids have a corner on morality and have never gone off the deep end, right?). Church doctrines can motivate many people for completely wrong reasons. Fear of missing out on the celestial kingdom; fear of not measuring up; fear of being separated from your family in the eternities; fear of whatever. How about being motivated by love? How about being motivated by integrity? How about being motivated by your own personal values?

The last reason I will give of why the church might be harmful to my kids is the indoctrination and, dare I say, brainwashing that goes on. All one has to do is go to a fast and testimony meeting to hear the memorized responses to know what I’m talking about here. If I had a dollar for every time I heard the phrase “I know this church is true” I could retire comfortably in Maui. What on earth is that even supposed to mean? Whatever happened to walking by faith? Was the church true when it taught that blacks couldn’t hold the priesthood and that darker skin was a result of being less valiant in the pre-existence? Was it true when it preached that Adam was God? You get the picture. I would submit that the church today is drastically different than the early church. Is it truer now than it was back then? If there were false teachings in the church historically, its probably a pretty safe bet that there are false teachings in the church today. Additionally, I view it as quite an arrogant thing to say, especially when so many other people from other faiths believe that they have the truth themselves. Is there a perception of weakness and being less valiant if a testimony has honest words like “I believe” and “I hope” and “I have faith in...”? I cringe every time I see a little child sharing their testimony while they are spoon-fed what to say from an older sibling or parent. I cringe even more when I hear that the way to gain a testimony is to bear it, even if you don’t believe it. Really?

WHY I LOVE THE CHURCH

Enough of the negative. Let’s get to the positive and why I love the church. You may not believe me after reading what I have written so far, but I really do. I hope I can drive that point across as effectively as I have my frustrations, complaints, doubts and reservations.

My wife and I were on a walk the other day and we were trying to imagine what our lives would be like without the church. I'm sure you have seen the classic "It's a Wonderful Life". Well, for both my wife and I, it is easy to imagine a drastically different life without the church in our lives. I don't think I would have even been born. Even if I was, I could easily see my father being an abusive tyrant, because that's how his own father was and his step-father before him. The gospel changed my parents' lives! I have been blessed with amazing parents, leaders and teachers to influence my life. I consider my life to have been immensely blessed because of the church. I have been surrounded by good examples and role models. I would not have met my wife. My kids have had positive role models as well. The list just goes on and on. It is almost frightening to imagine what my life could have been like without the church. Even now, after I have lost my testimony in much of the church, I struggle with how my continued relationship with the church should be. What else is out there to positively influence my children, especially through the turbulent teenage years (there comes the fear-based thinking again...)?

Music is something else I love about the church. I love the hymns. I love the choirs. The power behind singing in a big auditorium or a gathering of men for priesthood meeting for example has been awe inspiring for me. Oftentimes during my life when I struggled with feeling the spirit and feeling close to God, the only way to get through my thick skull would be through music. Joining the institute choir because of my college roommate (he said it would be an awesome place to meet girls) kept me from going inactive after my mission. And performing with that choir in the tabernacle was AWESOME! Learning how to play the guitar has also been a boost for me. I have felt closer to God at times as I sing and pick away at the strings. I also love playing calming music on a Sunday afternoon. I love the music of Peter Breinholt and The Piano Guys and plenty of other LDS artists.

The doctrine that families can be together forever is something else I love about the church. I hope it is still true! I love my family more than I can express. I love my parents. I love my kids. I love my wife. I have grown to love so many people in my life. The idea that I can rub shoulders surrounded by these people and have that kind of a community sounds wonderful to me. I love the emphasis the church places on families. I love that other people from outside of the faith can

recognize the emphasis and the strength of LDS families as well. I love the Mexican culture and the emphasis and love they place on families; their Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebration to honor their ancestors. I love that Mormons and Mexicans (and many other cultures, I'm sure) are the same in that they love and honor and look after those who have gone before.

I love the values and morals that are taught in the church. I love the compass and the anchor that the teaching of the church has been in my life. I can look back and see specific instances where I have made better choices because of that anchor. One experience in particular stands out in my mind. It literally was like two roads diverging now that I look back on it. How thankful I am that I was able to have the faith to reject the friend group that was pulling me down and find a completely different friend group. I have seen plenty of instances where friends and acquaintances struggled because of making choices contrary to gospel teachings (and what I think is common sense, frankly). I can't argue with the finished product of church membership in many instances. I think in many respects the church has been great for my kids and has helped them through the teenage years as well. Or maybe it's because they have such a terrific Mom? Either way, my kids are awesome!

Youth programs in the church are fantastic! I look back on my youth and the programs provided with overall happy and positive memories. It truly does take a village to raise a child. I owe a debt of gratitude to so many people and the positive influence they had on my life. Thank you for the scouting program, back when it wasn't the political correctness football that it is now, and back when the program was more concerned about making boys into men than it was about filling squares and cranking out as many merit badges as possible in a weekend. The Scout Law and The Scout Oath became much more than memorized words to me. I loved mutual and the outlet it provided for clean, fun, wholesome activities. I will always be grateful for the time, effort, and patience afforded me by these wonderful "saints" in my life!

The Book of Mormon, like I mentioned previously, is a book that I love. Its pages and its verses have the power to change lives. When I read the verse in Alma 48:17 for the first time, it changed my life. "...If all men had been, and were, and ever would be, like unto Moroni, behold, the very powers of hell would have been

shaken forever; yea, the devil would never have power over the hearts of the children of men.” I have taken that scripture to heart and have often looked at myself in the mirror and asked the question “if everyone were like me, what kind of world would it be”? There are countless examples of scriptures in The Book of Mormon influencing lives for the better. Even if I no longer believe in the historicity of the book or the claims of how it came to be, I still believe that the book has truth, value, and goodness in its pages.

The next thing I love about the church are the countless acts of service that are provided daily by its members. Service is such an emphasized tenant of the church. In what other organization can you need to move someplace, get help loading everything from your home into the truck, and then already have a ready and eager contingent of helping hands to help you get unpacked and settled when you arrive? If I had a family emergency and need, there are literally dozens of people that come to mind that I could call and would provide aid, but most of them would be my Mormon friends. The relief society is one of the greatest examples of service around. Once again, if I had a dollar for every time I witnessed an act of service, was the recipient of an act of service or listened to a talk about service, I could get that beach house in Maui.

Right in line with service is the organizational ability of the church. If there is a natural disaster anywhere in the world, there is a good chance that the church is going to be there before anyone else. They have an ability to muster the troops and deploy the fleet that would rival my time spent in the Air Force. There is a good chance that others have seen the bright yellow t-shirts of the Mormon Helping Hands (I don't think service should be advertised in such a way, but I digress) for a hurricane cleanup or any other disaster. These are GOOD people, trying to help make the world a better place. Additionally, if there is someone in the ward who needs help, there is a good chance that the problem is trying to be addressed. Members of the church are fantastic at taking care of their own.

The next thing I love about the church is the emphasis the church places on Christ. I think it is laughable that other people and religions don't consider Mormons to be Christians. I realize that if you get all wrapped around the axle with the exhausting (and I think pointless) debate of being saved by works or grace, or of the Mormon Jesus being different than the Jesus of every other Christian religion,

the natural thing is to brand Mormonism as a cult and non-Christian. I have lived my whole life in the church. I have seen nothing but a love of Christ and members trying to follow the teachings of Christ my entire life. Some of the greatest examples of people I believe to be living like Christ would want are members of the church.

Our family had to move around a lot during my time in the Air Force. In each instance, we had a near instant group of friends; people that you could trust and count on as soon as we arrived. They are people who would share your same morals and values and people that you would naturally want your kids and family to associate with. There is an instant bond and a mutual understanding because you share the same language and culture. I have been all over the world, and it is wonderful to rub shoulders with fellow members wherever you happen to be. I cherish the memories of being able to attend church and take the sacrament in a tent, dressed in my desert flight suit during deployments to Kuwait, Oman and Saudi Arabia, often with only a handful of other members. It gave me a whole new appreciation of the scripture in Matthew that teaches “for where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them”. The church is like a McDonalds franchise. It doesn’t matter where you are, you can always get your Big Mac.

There have been a few times when members of the church have taken advantage of that bond and trust to swindle and deceive. My brother-in-law and I got wrapped up in a Ponzi scheme with a member of the church (returned missionary, temple recommend holder, bla bla bla) before Bernie Madoff was a household name. I also watched an episode of “American Greed” that showcased a Mormon Bishop who swindled everyone, including his own parents, in Colorado. These stories are by far the exception. They happen infrequently enough to be shocking and completely out of the norm. It makes great headlines for “Dateline” and other news outlets trying to sell a story based on the sensational, but I consider most LDS members to be honest and lovers of truth. And, for the most part, if I had to pick a family who would make a great neighbor, a mechanic to work on my car, or someone who would have my back during the zombie apocalypse, odds are I couldn’t go wrong by picking a Mormon!

I love the emphasis the church places on self-reliance; of getting out of debt and staying out of debt; of saving for a rainy day and for being prepared for emergencies. I love the value the church places on an honest day's work; of providing for your family and not being dependent on government programs and welfare. I love the stories of the pioneers and for knowing that they are largely responsible for taming the west. I love their work ethic and their courage and faith.

I love many of the doctrines of the church. I love the gospel the church teaches. It makes sense to me and it resonates with me. I may have been a "cafeteria Mormon" and cherry picked the doctrines that I loved and rejected the ones I didn't, but I think if everyone is honest with themselves, they do the same thing.

As I read back on my reasons for loving the church, it hit home to me even stronger how much the MEMBERS are what makes this church what it is. I can't say it enough. Members of the church are often called "Mormons", but occasionally they are called what I believe many are... "Saints" and, more specifically, "Christians". Those who are truly trying to follow Christ's teachings and live their lives in his shadow are, I believe, some of the "salt of the earth". I am grateful to have known and associated with so many of them and I hope those friendships and relationships can continue, despite my current lack of faith.

I will always be Mormon. It is my DNA, my culture, my fabric, my language, my tribe, my hood, my homies, and my blood. I may be excommunicated or eventually decide to have my name removed from the records, but parts of me will always remain. The struggle I am facing now is how to filter the harmful and toxic influences of the church in my and my family's life and allowing in the good. Is it even possible? Is there room in the church for a disbelieving and apostate member like me?

WHAT DO I BELIEVE IN NOW?

So, the question often gets asked of me now that if I don't believe in the church, what DO I believe in? What are my new Articles of Faith? I have only had a few months to try to process my thoughts and feelings about everything, so this is still a work in progress. I will try to briefly sum up where I am at...

I don't think a lot of my core beliefs have changed at all. I think there is good and truth in practically all religions. I still feel like I am pretty much the same person I was before. I may not believe in the priesthood, Joseph Smith, the historicity of The Book of Mormon, the temple endowment, modern prophets, many of the truth claims of the church, etc., but I have never lost my faith in Christ during any of this. I believe in His atonement, in His love, and in the good news of His gospel. And I theorize that even if my feelings about the divinity of Christ were to ever change, I would still believe that the world would be a better place if everyone would treat each other according to His teachings. I believe that the secret to a happy life lies in the same, whether one subscribes to Christianity or atheism or some other religion or philosophy. I don't think it matters all that much, because at the core, I think most religions and philosophies feel and teach the same. It isn't rocket science. Love each other! Treat others the way you would want to be treated, whether they are a child or an adult, gay or straight, Mormon or Muslim, whatever. I believe that Mormonism is but one of many instruments in God's sublime orchestra. It makes beautiful music for some but a different instrument is needed for others. And, when the rubber meets the road, I believe true faith is evident in how you ACT (especially when no one is looking), not in whatever dogma or creed you may profess.

I believe that learning how to love is what it's all about. When I think of people who are rejected and persecuted because of their beliefs, I just have to shake my head. Don't let dogma and religion get in the way of loving and respecting people, especially when it comes to your own family! A quote gets attributed to Abraham Lincoln (even if he was quoting someone else) that "when I do good, I feel good and when I do bad, I feel bad. That's my religion." That sounds pretty reasonable to me.

I believe that there is good in everyone. I am constantly amazed at the special talents and abilities of others. I am amazed at peoples' goodness. But there is also evil in our world. I cannot understand the way we treat one another sometimes. I just don't get it. I hope I never do...

I have experienced what I consider to be miracles and spiritual experiences in my life. I have no desire to try to diminish or to try to explain them away. They are real as far as I am concerned, and I am grateful for them. I believe other people

from all other religions and all walks of life are looked after as well. I believe this life isn't just by chance. I have to believe that there is a purpose for our time here.

Admittedly, however, part of my brain is somewhat agnostic (even though I hate that term and I hate labels in general). I struggle with the concept that some people's prayers have been "answered" in finding their lost puppy or car keys while the prayers of rape victims, starving populations, abused children, and many more travesties go "unanswered". In many ways, God is a mystery to me, but I see law, order, beauty and majesty everywhere. I'm also a lot more at peace with not knowing and not having all the answers and being OK with that.

I haven't felt an overwhelming need to drink, smoke, gorge myself with marijuana brownies, party like a rock star, pierce my nipples, cheat on Heather, or whatever else some people who leave the church decide to do. The way I have lived my life has worked out pretty good as far as I can tell. I have a beautiful family, a great job, good friends, freedom, and legion of undeserved blessings. I'd like to keep a good thing going.

(I am going to interject here again and try to explain an observation from my recent 20/20 hindsight since my "transition of faith". In the past, many of my motivations stemmed from various doctrines of the church, from fear, and from outside pressures. It has been refreshing to take a step back and realize some of the things that I value and some of the other things that motivate me now. It's refreshing to be motivated simply because of these values that I personally subscribe to. I want to teach my kids to be motivated for the same reasons. For example, I want my kids to stay away from harmful drugs, be sexually responsible, to work hard in school, treat others with love and respect, etc. because they want and value that for THEMSELVES, not because an apostle told them to or because of future heavenly rewards or because of doctrine or because of something fear-based. As another example, after my "faith transition", I initially feared doing something that could be viewed by my children or others as a "sin" because it would justify their belief that I had been "deceived" and that I had "lost the spirit". I recognize this thought process as being erroneously fear-based and projecting my assumptions on what others might be thinking about me. Both are inferior reasons for behavior. OK, back to what I believe.)

I believe in family. I love my family more now than I ever have. I hope not, but this life just might be all we get. My current perspective makes me want to make the most of the precious time I have with them. I want to give my kids bear hugs all the time and just tell them that I love them every day and throughout the day. I treasure friendships and relationships now more than ever.

I love America. I love the freedoms and opportunities that so many others have fought and died and struggled and worked for. Daily I drink water from a well I did not dig. That well has been provided by soldiers, pioneers, teachers, parents, scientists, dreamers, scholars, inventors, laborers, doctors and scores of those who have gone before and paved the way. I believe those freedoms are still paramount and worth fighting for and protecting. I believe everyone, regardless of country of origin, ethnicity, age, gender, whatever deserves those freedoms as well.

I still love the Scout Oath and Law. Being trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, reverent; being physically strong (gotta work on my my mini-Buddha of a gut), mentally awake, and morally straight.

Since I'm giving laundry lists, I'll add my continued belief in the 13th article of faith; of seeking out things that are virtuous, lovely, of good report and praiseworthy. I still subscribe to the concept that we are "agents unto ourselves" and have the capacity to bring about good or evil. We are masters of our own ships and can set sail in whatever direction we choose. I have to believe that what we decide to fill our days with matters!

I believe in gratitude and looking for the good and beauty in our lives because it is everywhere!

And I believe in love. If this life truly is a schoolhouse for us to experience and to learn and to grow, I believe the main point of it all is to learn how to love each other. I am reminded daily of how far away I am from where I want to be, but I'm going to keep trying.

REFERENCES

As promised, I am including some links to some of the areas I have looked at and that I think might be helpful. The first one is the essays that the church has on their own website. Many members are clueless as to their existence even. It is not really advertised, and the authors are not revealed (ironically like one of the last conference talks warned about when researching things on the internet). Some members when they saw these essays on the church website originally thought that the site had been maliciously hacked. It is refreshing to see the church being more forthcoming, even if it might be because they have been forced to legally or because they need to respond to the wealth of easily accessible information on the internet to try to stem the tide of people like me who are leaving. Whatever the reason, here is the link:

<https://www.lds.org/topics/essays?lang=eng>

The next link I will provide is the CES letter. It was a letter written to the CES director of the church by a man who felt he had many legitimate questions and doubts, just like me. The director had asked the man to provide his list of questions so he could have a look at them and resolve them. This letter is one of the most concise resources one can go to for so many of the problems and issues in the church. Additionally, Jeremy's resources for his information, his hyperlinks and references, largely point to the church's own materials. He has gone out of his way to try to have legitimate references. I would also encourage you to look at his interviews and background. He wrote the letter from his conclusion that the church isn't true, so be aware of his agenda and background. You may think that I side completely with Jeremy, but I don't. There are many items in that letter that I disagree with or don't see as particularly valid arguments.

<https://cesletter.org/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= nMadctXvMg>

<https://www.mormonstories.org/podcast/jeremy-runnells-and-his-letter-to-a-ces-director/>

Next I will provide a link to the main apologetic web sites for the church. In many instances, the answers I received on these sites only made things worse for me. I felt that many of the arguments or explanations were hollow. I think people lose credibility when they will do or say anything to try to make a specific narrative fit, even if a mountain of evidence points otherwise. This site isn't endorsed by the church but is a back-door way for the church to have many of their difficult questions addressed.

<https://www.fairmormon.org/>

<https://mi.byu.edu/>

Next is Mormon Leaks. For those who know the story behind wiki leaks, it's the same thing, only dealing with Mormonism. Ask yourself if this site would even exist if the church was honest and transparent and had nothing to hide?

[https://mormonleaks.io/wiki/index.php?title=Main Page](https://mormonleaks.io/wiki/index.php?title=Main_Page)

I referenced a secret temple ceremony reserved for only a select few at the highest levels of the church. This ceremony is to have their "calling and election made sure". Tom Phillips, a former Stake President and personal friend of Elder Holland shares his story here:

<https://www.mormonstories.org/podcast/tom-phillips-and-the-second-anointing/>

I wrote that the amount of money the church gave to charity was embarrassingly small. This next link is why I wrote what I did. I used to think that if there was ever a good use of a charitable donation, it would be to the church. I was literally DUMBFOUNDED when I saw this for the first time. You will see that the total contributions the church made to charity totaled 1.4 billion from 1985-2011. That sounds like a lot of money until you do the math and google estimates of how much the church owns and how wealthy it is. It also boggles the mind when you see that more money was spent on their City Creek shopping mall than the total

combined charitable contributions of the church for 26 years. 26 YEARS!!! It's all I can do to write this paragraph using PG language! Let's do a conservative estimate, just for fun: 1.4 billion divided by 26 years equals about \$54 million per year. Google told me that the church rakes in over 8 billion a year in donations so it must be true (I have to go with that because the church won't tell me any differently). Anyway, check my math because I went to school at Utah State, but my calculator tells me only 0.675 of 1% goes out to charity each year. How much of those millions are donations specifically earmarked for ONLY humanitarian aid? If these numbers are indeed legitimate, "embarrassed" doesn't even begin to describe how I feel...

<https://www.lds.org/bc/content/shared/content/english/pdf/welfare/2011-welfare-services-fact-sheet.pdf>

I know I referenced this, so here's the link to the "Dear Mormon Man, Tell Me What Would You Do?" blog:

<https://mormondom.com/letter-to-a-mormon-man-8d251aa1f062>

Next is a link to the 1835 version of the Doctrine and Covenants, section 101 where it deals with marriage that I referenced.

<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/doctrine-and-covenants-1835/259>

Here is a link to the talk given by Brad Wilcox about grace. I have watched it multiple times and think many will benefit from watching it as well.

https://youtu.be/yLXr9it_pbY

I only brought up a few of the main issues that bother me about Mormonism. This website does a good job of laying out many more of the difficult aspects of the church. Additionally, they offer an orthodox, critical, apologetic, and reconciliatory view for each subject.

<http://mormonprimer.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/MormonPrimer7.pdf>

Here is the link to the 1832 version of the first vision account that shows the pages cut out and taped back in. Use the slider on the left to zoom in. Also, be sure to expand the source notes where it admits to the pages being removed and taped back.

<https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/3#source-note>

Here is one of the resources that has been most helpful and therapeutic for me as I have gone through my “faith transition”. It is a series of podcasts called Mormon Stories. It has helped me realize that I am not alone in the way that I feel, far from it. It has probably saved me thousands in what would otherwise be spent on a shrink trying to understand and come to grips with myself. John has been putting podcasts on there since 2007. Plus, he’s an Aggie, so he can’t be all bad (although he certainly has his own agendas as well). Search through them and listen to the ones that you think are worth your time. Like anything, there is good and bad to sift through, but overall I have found it extremely worthwhile. This will get you started:

<https://www.mormonstories.org/about/>

Another podcast that is from the same grouping is called “Marriage on a Tightrope”. It is presented by a couple in a mixed faith relationship after the husband lost his testimony while the wife remained orthodox. It is so refreshing to hear the honest and authentic viewpoints from these podcasts. I’ll take them over a carefully scripted, whitewashed, one sided, tele-prompted talk any day...

<https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/marriage-on-a-tightrope/id1357712824?mt=2>

I'm not going to provide links that have brought me to my conclusions about polygamy, the Book of Abraham translation, etc. There are simply too many to list. This paper would be another hundred pages. Information is out there. Don't be afraid of it. Use your discernment/brain to filter out what is worthwhile and what isn't. There is a good possibility that some of your conclusions might be different than mine. That's ok. We can still be friends, I promise...

If there is any part of this paper where you feel that I have been dishonest or misleading or would like further clarification, please feel free to give me a shout. I'll do my best to explain and clear things up. No matter how hard I have tried, I'm sure things will be read and interpreted that are not intended. I'm open to different ideas and viewpoints and I appreciate being corrected when it is warranted. The truth MATTERS to me! I was absolutely crushed when I found out that my missionary buddy had lied to me and abused my trust and I have felt betrayed again at the further dishonesty I perceive with the church and with Joseph Smith. Please, if you feel I have been dishonest in any part of this paper, let me know so we can clear things up! Dishonesty hurts, and I don't want to hurt anybody...

I have spent hours and hours pondering, writing and rewriting this paper. I have edited and chosen my words carefully. I wrote this to try to help process my feelings and organize my thoughts after my world came crashing down. I also wrote it in the hopes that my wife, children, parents, family and friends can someday understand why I have made the choices that I have. I have done my best to not have divisive language and to not be antagonizing or condescending. I have tried to be honest and fair and objective. I have tried to not make broad, sweeping statements. I know I have portrayed questions in previous sections as factual, because that is how it appears to me from my study. I certainly don't want to portray the view that I am right and everyone else is wrong. This has only been my journey. I hope it comes across as such. Everyone must take their own journey as well, (I am inclined to believe that many separate paths are all pointing in the same general direction anyway...).

IN CONCLUSION...

A few years ago, a brother of mine introduced me to the joys of sailing. There are many analogies to sailing compared to life: stormy seas, charting your course, following the North Star or your compass, the importance of your rudder, the necessity of wind, etc. Here's another analogy for your consideration: My whole life I have been on a boat sailing along towards the promised land. I have been warned and advised many times to "stay in the boat" because stormy and dangerous seas with sharks abound (fear, fear and more fear). When I experienced my "crisis of faith", I likened it to a torpedo obliterating the ship I was sailing on and tossing me headlong into an angry sea. I currently feel like there is no boat for me to stay in, even if I wanted to! All I had left after the torpedo hit were bits and pieces of wood and other parts of the boat that surrounded me. Some of these pieces are big and useful. Some of them remain out of reach, and some of them have sunk to the abyss and are gone forever. I have found, however, that the sea isn't as scary as I thought. Sharks haven't eaten me yet. Sunsets are still beautiful. Stars in the night sky are brilliant and majestic. I still feel like friendly currents are pushing me along. Perhaps a different boat will someday cross my path with an irresistible smell of delicious, freshly cooked home-made whole wheat pancakes, but for now I am content to continue my journey on my reconstructed raft with the good pieces and materials I have left over...

And perhaps, in some small way, maybe part of our purpose in life is to try to venture outside of the boat anyway, just like Peter did? Maybe part of our individual growth happens when we try to walk on water ourselves instead of cowering in perceived safety and security like the other disciples? Maybe it's not that big of a deal to sink and to fail and to experience? Maybe the sea isn't as rough and scary as you think?

To be clear, I have personally concluded that Mormonism is not the hidden keyhole that will open the door to the treasures in secret chambers beyond. For me, I don't see many of the truths the church claims as able to stand the litmus test of personal experience or the tests of historical and scientific scrutiny. It also fails to satisfy my personal demands and expectations. For others, it is that hidden keyhole. It works and it is wonderful. It provides the community, spiritual

nourishment, direction, peace, or whatever it is that they are looking for. Great! I applaud you in your own devotions and for living your own convictions. I am confident we can see past religious or ideological differences and love and respect each other anyway. The seas are large enough to handle many different kinds of ships...

And if you have made it to the end of this, my hat is off to you. I figure I would have put you to sleep long before now. Thanks for your investment of time. I appreciate you trying to understand where I am coming from. Hopefully you feel that I give you the same allowance and consideration.

Finally, I direct this last paragraph to those who are close to me, and especially to my wife and children. Please forgive me for hurting you. Although I feel blamed and vilified for things that I don't think are my fault, it doesn't make the situation any easier for anyone. Me not being able to enter the temple has forced an uncomfortable situation on us all. Knowing how much I would eventually have to hurt you because of my rejection of the church has tormented me with many a sleepless night and many tears shed. Despite the pain I have experienced, I acknowledge that the pain you have experienced (and will undoubtedly continue to experience) might be even worse? I know that in your world, I have let you down. Please forgive me for shattering your expectations. Please forgive me for missing our daughter's wedding. I was given an impossible choice where I was damned no matter what I did. I ultimately chose to "do what is right, let the consequence follow" in the best way I knew how. I hope that someday you can all understand. Regardless, I will always be sorry for the pain caused. I wish there could have been another way. I love you guys!