

# “Lord, To Whom Shall We Go?” The Challenges of Discipleship and Church Membership

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*The gospel is true, is true.*

*Everything else is anybody's guess.*

Robert Christmas, “Hungry Sunday”<sup>1</sup>

Over the course of a lifetime, I have had occasion to give thought to the question of why I continue to be an active, committed member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It seems to have become more important during periods when official actions of the Church clashed with my expectations of how the Church should respond (for example, during the Civil Rights movement—especially around issues of denial of the priesthood to blacks; during the battle over the Equal Rights Amendment; during the Vietnam war; and for the past several decades over the Church’s treatment of homosexuals). The question of staying has also been raised at times when I have experienced deep pain because of the treatment by ecclesiastical leaders toward me and those I love.

Up until this point in my life—and I suspect this will hold true for the remainder of my life—my strategy for managing such issues has been to deal quietly and privately with my personal pain and to try and work for change on important issues from within. I realize that this is not the only possible strategy, but it is the one I have chosen. Aside from this, there are a number of reasons why I stay. I recognize at the outset that they are highly subjective. I make no apology for this fact. The reasons I stay can be put into the following categories (if I can be forgiven the extreme allitera-

tion!): people, principles, promises—and then some reasons that are purely practical and personal.

### People

One of the chief reasons I stay is related to people. This includes my family of origin; my siblings; my wife's and their families; my children; my grandchildren; my friends; and a group of people with whom I have a tangential relationship but whose faith is somehow connected to my faith. I also stay because I believe my staying may have an influence on those who will come in future generations.

My family was converted to the restored gospel independently in four separate generations, beginning with my great-great grandparents who were converts to the Church from Wales during the first great missionary gathering in the early days of the Church. They and their three sons immigrated to the Great Basin Kingdom in the 1850s, but the parents and one son returned to Wales shortly thereafter. Another son stayed in Utah where he became a prominent educator; the third son, my great-grandfather, David Rees, left the Church, moved to Missouri, and joined the Reorganized Church.

My grandfather, Zoram Rees, although bearing a Book of Mormon name, never belonged to the Church; but his wife, my grandmother, Emma Jane Rees Maddox, was converted to it by Mormon missionaries traveling through Southwestern Colorado during the 1920s. Two of my aunts were baptized with my grandmother, but my father, then a boy of 12, was not. In his twenties, however, my father was converted to the gospel through what he considered a miraculous priesthood healing. This occurred when I was an infant and after he and my mother had been divorced for some time. When I was ten, my father returned from the Second World War, taught me the gospel, and then baptized me in the Mesa Temple. Thus, there were four independent conversions of my family over five generations. It is therefore partly because of what I consider the Lord's persistence with the Rees family, and out of respect for the sacrifices my forebears made to be part of the Lord's great latter-day work, that I stay.

In spite of these various conversions, there was a period of many years when I was the only member of my family active in the Church. I can remember many Sunday mornings during my teenage years when I arose and rode the bus alone to church—to the Long Beach First Ward and later

to the Long Beach Fifth Ward. I believe that my faithfulness during those and subsequent years may have influenced my father and several siblings in their return to the Church many years later. Before he passed away, my father served a mission for the Church and served in the temple. I continue to stay for my reactivated siblings because I see how much happier their lives are because of their association with the Church. I stay because at times, in my own and my wife's families, there is no one else to perform baptisms, give blessings, speak at funerals, or go to the temple with someone for the first time.

One of the most important reasons for my faithfulness to the gospel and my commitment to the Church is my own children and grandchildren, some of whom are active in the Church and some of whom are not. I could wish that they all had a faith as fervent as my own, that they were all enjoying the blessings of the restored gospel. I want my children and grandchildren, as well as those of future generations, to know that my faithfulness has been the most powerful influence shaping who I am, that whatever claim I have of being a good father and grandfather is directly related to the way the restored gospel has shaped my soul. I hope that, when they think of me, they say, as e. e. cummings said of his father:

because my Father lived his soul  
love is the whole and more than all.<sup>2</sup>

I stay for all of those to whom over the course of a lifetime I have taught the gospel and to whom I have borne my testimony. I still keep in touch with people to whom I had the privilege of teaching the gospel when I was a young missionary. Recently my former companions and I had a reunion with three couples who joined the Church in the first city in which I labored, Kankakee, Illinois. It was a joyful occasion to see how their lives and the lives of their families have been profoundly affected by the gospel. I stay because of all of the young single adults I had the privilege of serving as a bishop. I stay because of the good people of Lithuania whom my wife and I had the blessing of welcoming into the Church in the Baltic States. Witnessing the transformation of their lives through the restored gospel was one of the most meaningful experiences of my life.

I stay because of those I meet throughout my travels and in the various wards in which I have lived who feel estranged, who are different, whose ties to the Church are tenuous, who question and doubt. Because I

stay, I believe that others are encouraged to stay. As I said to Karl Keller many years ago, "If all of those of us who see what is wrong with the Church leave it, where will the Church's conscience be?"<sup>3</sup> I don't flatter myself that I am the Church's conscience, but I believe that, along with hundreds of thousands of others, I am part of that conscience.

I also stay because the Church has made possible the deepest most meaningful friendships in my life. I truly understand what it is like to love and be loved as a friend, to have bonds with men and women that I believe will transcend mortality. I stay because they stay.

### Principles

I continue my devotion to the gospel and my loyalty to the Church because of principles. Over the course of a lifetime, I have found the principles of the gospel enlightening, liberating, and ennobling. I speak initially of the first principles—of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and repentance. But I also speak of those principles that we tend to neglect, of which William Faulkner spoke in his Nobel acceptance speech—"love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice," what Faulkner called "the eternal verities," "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself."<sup>4</sup> To Faulkner's list, I would add courage, humility, and integrity. I believe the Church makes possible a laboratory in which these principles can be acted upon. It isn't the only place, of course, but it is one of the good places.

I believe, for example, that the Church offers many opportunities for us to sacrifice, to go outside and beyond ourselves in ways that school our souls and enlarge our hearts. Here I speak of such small sacrifices as fasting, paying tithes and offerings, and serving others. Were it not for the Church's encouragement that I spend one day a month going without food or drink, I doubt that I would hold in my heart the privation of those millions throughout the world who go hungry each night or that I would contribute, however modestly, to relieve their suffering. Were it not for the Church, I seriously doubt that I would contribute a tenth of my income to support the many good things the Church does. Nor would I likely sacrifice other personal desires in order to serve others. In addition to fulfilling many ordinary callings throughout my life, I have given nearly a tenth of my life in full-time service to the Church and that service has deepened and enriched my life immeasurably.

Among the principles the Church has taught me to follow (even

though it has not always been happy with how I have done so) is the moral imperative to work for social justice, to respectfully challenge and question the Church itself when, in my judgment, it falls short of its own stated ideals, and to minister to those whom society (and sometimes even the Church itself) considers "the least of these," those whom Mother Teresa called "Jesus in disguise."

I stay because the Church affords me numerous opportunities to live the Golden Rule, to do unto others as I would have them do unto me. I believe, by the way, that this principle refers to the institution of the Church itself—that we are obligated to do unto it as we would have it do unto us, which is one of the reasons I continue to give it my allegiance in spite of the fact that I feel it is not always completely deserving of that allegiance. I believe that a higher manifestation of this principle as it applies both to individuals and to institutions is, "Do not do unto others as they have done unto you."<sup>5</sup> This requires greater courage, humility and love.

The principles I mention are best exemplified in the life of Christ. My attempts to follow them for which the Church affords opportunities have, I believe, made me a more determined, a more dedicated, and a more faithful disciple. One of the reasons I stay is because I believe that these principles are best followed within a community where people can work together to give them concrete manifestation in ways that make the world a better place.

I stay because I know that these principles produce goodness, and I want to be a part of that goodness. That goodness and its attendant innocence and purity are reflected in the lives of Latter-day Saints. Not always and not perfectly, but nevertheless palpably. The world is in desperate need of such goodness, and I want to help refine and magnify it—in my own life, in the lives of my fellow saints, and in the Church itself.

### Promises

One of the reasons I stay is because of promises and covenants I have made and those that have been made to me by the Lord and by others. When I was a boy of fifteen, I traveled from the small Arizona town in which we lived to Mesa to receive my patriarchal blessing. Alma Davis, the patriarch who laid his hands on my head that day, made what I consider inspired and wonderful promises, promises that have unfolded throughout my life of serious, sustained engagement in the Church. Patriarch Davis spoke of covenants that I made with the Lord in the preexistence and

which He made with me personally as well, including the promise that I would do my best to fulfill the mission given to me and his promise "that he would give [me] His Spirit as a guide and companion." I have felt the guidance and companionship of that spirit throughout my life.

I speak also of the promises the Lord and I make to one another each Sunday when (to use Bruce Jorgensen's image)<sup>6</sup> I take the "shard of bread" and "paper thimble of water" to renew my covenants. I stay because I believe that the weekly renewal of that bond is one of the most important influences in my life. It keeps fresh in my mind and my imagination the reality of Christ's mercy and his unconditional love for me. It keeps fresh my promise to remember that I have taken upon myself his name—and all that that implies of lifting the burdens and binding the wounds of others.

I speak of the promises my wife and I made across the altar of the temple and of the promise that the bond between us, which has deepened and expanded over the years, can be eternal. I speak also of the promises made by the Prophet Joseph Smith (and affirmed by subsequent prophets) that "the eternal sealings of faithful parents and the divine promise made to them for valiant service in the Cause of Truth, would save not only themselves, but likewise their posterity." This includes those who are "careless and disobedient," who wander from or who leave the Church.<sup>7</sup> In the words of Brigham Young, "I care not where those children go, they are bound up to their parents by an everlasting tie, and no power on earth or hell can separate them from their parents in eternity."<sup>8</sup> On one level, this does not make sense to me, but on another, I feel like the speaker in Thomas Hardy's poem, "The Oxen," who, although he doubts the truth of the fable he has heard that oxen kneel in devotion to the Christ-child in the manger, nevertheless on Christmas Eve goes to his own stable, "hoping it might be so."<sup>9</sup>

### Personal

Finally, I stay for a number of personal reasons beyond those mentioned above. I stay because I want to be part of the remarkable spiritual and social revolution that began when young Joseph knelt in that grove of trees near Palmyra. For all the limitations of the Church itself, over a lifetime of the study of religion, I find Christian Mormonism the most satisfying and enlightening religious philosophy of all I know. The concept of godhood as constituting a personal, loving Heavenly Father and Mother

and of humans as their perfectible children, the most precious things in the created universe, with infinite, eternal possibilities, is extremely appealing and deeply soul satisfying.

The doctrines of Mormonism are among the most enlightened in human history. Consider, for example, the amazing teachings embedded in Joseph Smith's King Follett Discourse and in Section 84 of the Doctrine and Covenants—that God desires to give to his children everything that he has: all knowledge, all power, all glory, even the ultimate and crowning glory of godhood itself. Is there a grander teaching in the annals of religion than this?

I stay because I love to sing the songs of Zion. Joining my voices with others each Sunday morning is a spiritual, kinesthetic experience. These songs, which Alma calls the songs of redeeming love, vibrate throughout our whole bodies and souls as we give full-hearted and full-throated expression to our feelings of praise and celebration. One of the functions of hymn singing is to unify a congregation in a way that transcends their differences. For those few moments when we join our voices, expressing whatever we may feel of joy or praise or thanksgiving, we are as one (even when we are not in complete harmony!) In this way we "serve the Lord with gladness: com[ing] into his presence with singing" (Psalm 100:2).

I stay because I sincerely believe that the Lord wants his Church to be better than it is, and I have the hope that I may play some small part in making it so. I believe he is not pleased when the Church as an institution and the majority of its members see blacks, homosexuals, intellectuals, or any that the majority considers "other" as unworthy to sit at his table in full fellowship. I don't believe he is pleased when dissent and open dialogue are discouraged, quashed, or, especially, punished. I don't believe he is pleased when women are relegated to second-class citizenship. I don't believe he is pleased when we abandon gospel principles to support partisan political positions or when we elect politicians who are more devoted to their party's platform than to the principles of the gospel or good governance.

I stay because I believe the Lord wants the Church to be more liberal. As Joseph Smith said, "Our Heavenly Father is more liberal in his views and more boundless in his mercies than we are ready to believe."<sup>10</sup> I applaud the Church's emphasis on conservative spiritual and moral values, but I also want it to emphasize more the gospel's inherent liberal social and political values. The extent to which Church leaders and mem-



bers counter the corrosive moral decay in our society is, to my mind, immensely important in creating a world where God's children have a greater opportunity for choice and true happiness. On the other hand, the extent to which Church leaders and members work against important social and political reforms, especially those that have to do with social justice and individual freedom, ultimately works against such opportunities. I believe, for example, that history and the Lord will judge our Mormon community for its zealous support of the present government policies, including its mad plunge into war in Iraq; its seeming callous disregard for the lives of innocent men, women, and children killed or maimed by our weapons; its torture and inhumane treatment of prisoners of war or "enemy combatants" and even innocents caught up in the net of the war on terror; and its disregard of international treaties and even the U.S. Constitution itself. Mormons should, in my view, be leading the outrage against such policies and actions instead of enthusiastically supporting them.

One of the challenges to my staying in the Church is that, as my spiritual life has evolved, I have found myself becoming more and more certain of fewer and fewer things. In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's idealistic central character holds in his imagination a fantastic image of the love of his life, Daisy Fay (whose last name suggests the fairy-like quality of Gatsby's obsession). His incredible devotion to that ideal is symbolized by the green light that burns at the end of Daisy's dock across the bay from his own house. Fitzgerald summarizes Gatsby's disillusionment when that idyllic image finally comes up against the hard reality of who Daisy really is: "His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one."<sup>11</sup> In the face of historical revelations, scientific discoveries and my own experience, the number of enchanted objects that hold my devotion to the Church has also diminished; but at the same time, those that I hold as pearls of great price have increased in value and intensity. William Sloane Coffin puts it perfectly: "[There] are those who prefer certainty to truth, those in church who put the purity of dogma ahead of the integrity of love. And what a distortion of the gospel it is to have limited sympathies and unlimited certainties, when the very reverse, to have limited certainties but unlimited sympathies, is not only more tolerant but far more Christian."<sup>12</sup>

Another reason I stay is because I have been blessed to have had many rich spiritual experiences over the course of a life in the Church. While some may dismiss such experiences as delusions or self-generated affirmations, as someone who has been blessed to have such experiences



("did not our bosoms burn within us as we walked with him on the way?"), with whatever I can manifest of intellectual and emotional honesty, I have to claim these as significant, valid experiences. Such spiritual experiences have helped to make me a believer in the original sense of that word. Latin for "I believe" is *credo* which means, literally, "I place it in my heart." Because I recognize that they are integral to who I am or choose to be, I place such experiences in my heart—or perhaps they are placed there by a gifting God. At any rate, this gospel and this church (as well as many other things) have made such gifts of the heart possible and for that I am immensely grateful.

A General Authority friend told me many years ago, "Bob, I believe you are destined to be a stranger in your own church." The fact is the Church is not a particularly friendly place for those who doubt or question, for those who, no matter how sincerely or respectfully, feel compelled to challenge the Church. When I have felt the impulse to leave or have felt out of joint in my own ward and stake, I remind myself that Christ chose to be energetically engaged in a congregation that was limited in its vision, judgment, taste, and charity—a congregation that ultimately rejected and abandoned him. I don't in any way mean to suggest that my position is similar to his, but I ask myself how I could do less than he did in continuing to be engaged in the pastoral, mutual-ministering dynamic within my faith community.

I confess that from time to time I have fleeting impulses to leave. My sentiments during these periods are akin to those expressed by Robert Frost in his poem "Birches":

It's when I'm weary of considerations,  
And life is too much like a pathless wood . . . [that]  
I'd like to get away from earth awhile  
And then come back to it and begin over.

Frost quickly adds:

May no fate willfully misunderstand me  
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away  
Not to return. Earth's the right place for love.  
I don't know where it's likely to go better.<sup>13</sup>

I believe the Church is the right place, or certainly *one* of the right places, for love; I don't know where it's likely to go better.

The ultimate reason I stay in the Mormon Church is because I have made a commitment to follow Christ and I believe that the Church is one of the places in which his work is to be done. It is not the only place, but it is the one I have chosen—or perhaps that has chosen me. Because I know in the deepest part of my being that he loves me, that he suffered for my sins in Gethsemane and on Calvary, and still suffers when I fall short of my commitment to him, in my small and inadequate way I know I must follow him. Christ calls us from the things of this world, and he calls us to his great work of bringing to pass the redemption of the world. Without our participation, that work cannot have its ultimate flowering. As Rumi says,

Where Jesus lives the great-hearted gather.  
We are a door that is never locked.  
If you suffer any kind of pain,  
Stay near this door. Open it.<sup>14</sup>

The saddest episode in the scriptures is that found in the gospel of John where Christ, seeing his disciples begin to abandon him as his mission reaches its climax, asks his chosen twelve, "Wilt thou also go away?" Peter's response is one that I think of when I consider leaving, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

Jogging on the streets of Salt Lake City during a recent visit, I noticed that someone had stenciled on sidewalks throughout the downtown area the words, "Trust Jesus." I do trust him. I trust him to be fair, I trust him to be constant, and, most of all, I trust him to continue loving me. I stay because I trust him.

A few weeks ago we celebrated Pioneer Day to honor the sacrifices of the early Saints. There is an episode in their crossing this great land that explains why I stay. At Winter Quarters a serious discussion was held about whether to cross the plains with handcarts that had been so hastily constructed and so late in the season. Levi Savage argued in vain that the crossing was ill advised and likely to be disastrous. One of the apostles promised that if the Saints pressed on they would transverse the wilderness without harm or loss of life. Savage knew better. "The tears rolled down his cheeks as he prophesied that if . . . [they] took the journey at that

late season of the year, their bones would strew the way." Nevertheless, he added, "If you elect to go ahead, I will come and assist, though it cost me my life."<sup>15</sup> They did go, and Levi Savage accompanied them and was instrumental in saving the lives of some of his fellow Saints. I don't consider myself heroic like Levi Savage, but his impulse to accompany the Saints on their journey, no matter how long or perilous, no matter how personally challenging, no matter the sacrifice or ultimate cost, is also my impulse. Perhaps more than anything, it explains why I stay.

### Notes

1. Robert Christmas, "Hungry Sunday," *Sunstone*, Issue 54 (March 1986): 23.
2. e. e. cummings, "my father lived through dooms of love," PoemHunter. Com. <http://www.poemhunter.com/p/m/poem.asp?poet=12845> &poem=175515 (accessed June 15, 2006).
3. [Karl Keller and Robert A. Rees], "Letters of Belief: An Exchange of Thoughts and Feelings About the Mormon Faith," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 9, no. 3 (Fall 1974): 9-20.
4. William Faulkner, Nobel Prize Speech, Stockholm, Sweden, December 10, 1950, <http://www.rjgeib.com/thoughts/faulkner/faulkner.html> (accessed August 17, 2004).
5. Or, as expressed by the feminist movement in Norway, "Do not do to them what they did to us." William Sloane Coffin, "Liberty to the Captives and Good Things to the Afflicted," *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches*, edited by Walter Wink (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1999), 109.
6. Bruce W. Jorgensen, "On Second West in Cedar City, Utah: Canticle for the Virgin," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1971): 65.
7. Orson F. Whitney, *Conference Report*, April 1929, 110, as quoted in "Hope for Parents of Wayward Children," *Ensign* 32, September 2002, 11.
8. Brigham Young, quoted by Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, compiled by Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954-56), 2:90-91.
9. Thomas Hardy, "The Oxen," [http://www.poetryconnection.net/poets/Thomas\\_Hardy/2719](http://www.poetryconnection.net/poets/Thomas_Hardy/2719).
10. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp. and ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (1938; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976 printing), 256.
11. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribners, 1953), 94.
12. Coffin, "Liberty to the Captives and Good Things to the Afflicted," 106-7.
13. Robert Frost, "Birches," *The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems*,

*Complete and Unabridged*, edited by Edward Connery Lathem, (New York: Henry Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 153.

14. Mowlana Jalaluddin Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks (Edison, N.J.: Castle Books, 1995), 201.

15. Quoted in William L. Knecht, "A Lesson From the Past," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 5, no. 3 (Fall 1970): 80.