

Changing Faiths Gave My Sons Hope

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On this year's Christmas letter to friends and family, I left out the fact that our two sons have joined another church. I prefer to avoid receiving sympathetic messages such as, "Don't be upset. The sealing ties are strong; they will come back," or even worse, "We'll pray for them." The truth is that I'm most grateful my sons have found a church in which they can believe and participate. Our elder son struggled for years to be an active Latter-day Saint, albeit one with serious doubts about the history and doctrine of his birth faith. Our younger son delighted for years in defying Church authorities and shocking devout LDS sensibilities.

Both our sons were intellectually inclined and began asking hard questions about the Church during their teen years. Not finding answers that satisfied them, both became religious skeptics. Although some people can deal constructively with the uncertainty of agnosticism and the finality of atheism, our sons found it hard to accept a world without religious hope. Our older son, Mark, became cynical and pessimistic after failing to find fulfillment in a successful career and material abundance. He longed for a family, but his lack of faith convinced his bishop that he was not worthy of a temple recommend despite his adherence to all of the other qualifications on the interview list. Without a temple recommend, he had no luck in convincing any active LDS girl to marry him.

Our younger son, Andrew, told me he'd never believed in the LDS Church. From his earliest years, he had felt that the hierarchy was in place only to try to make him do things he didn't want to. He said listening to Scout leaders and bishopric members talk at Scout camp, with no feminine influence around, convinced him that Church leaders are only mortal men. Andrew refused to show deference to our bishop and stake presi-

dent. Every time Andrew attended a priesthood advancement interview, our family's standing in our ward and stake dropped. He enjoyed disconcerting leaders with flippant answers such as, "Yes, but not for want of effort on my part," in response to the question about living a chaste life. He bragged about feigning ignorance of masturbation, then acted shocked when the stake president explained it. When philosophy and logic failed to satisfy Andrew's emotional and spiritual needs, he experimented with drugs and alcohol and became as cynical and pessimistic as his brother.

A few years previously, our youngest daughter had become a teen rebel, chafing at Church conformity and standards. I was dismayed, convinced that Allison was ruining her chance for a happy life. I forced her to attend Church activities she hated and tried to pick her friends—not realizing that the daughters of some of our good ward members behaved less spiritually on Saturday nights than on Sunday mornings. Allison saw the discrepancy as hypocrisy. She interpreted my concern for her as concern for our reputation in the ward.

Unfortunately, Allison's rebellion came while I was still an unquestioning Mormon myself. I knew the Church was true and the only way to happiness. Jim and I were active Latter-day Saints. Our family was sealed in the temple. We read scriptures, prayed as a family, and held family home evenings. How could our daughter reject the Church and its standards? We were both devastated; but Jim, with his less dogmatic outlook, handled Allison more constructively than I did. He addressed her behavior directly without bringing up the Church, while I tried to force her through the steps of repentance. It has taken years to repair the damage.

Mark and Andrew were more fortunate. By the time they were openly questioning the Church, I was working with some good non-LDS people who had testimonies of their own faiths every bit as strong as those of my LDS friends. I had learned that strong values and happy lives are not limited to members of one denomination. When Mark began reading *Dialogue* and *Sunstone*, I subscribed and read with him. A continuing education class on Mormon literature taught by Eugene England at the University of Utah introduced me to a variety of thoughtful LDS authors. My concept of Mormonism expanded to include multiple points of view. I studied and discussed with my sons instead of against them. Jim was also less disturbed by our sons' questioning than he had been by Allison's total rebellion.

By this time I had also recognized that not all of our children's

Church experiences had been positive. I remembered fourteen-year-old Mark asking me why he had never been called as quorum president. He had described finding a cache of *Playboy* magazines with the other boys in the ward. "I was the only one who didn't look at them, but Derek is always called to be quorum president, Jason is always first counselor, Mike is always second counselor and I'm always the secretary. Why doesn't Heavenly Father choose me to be president?" The simple truth was that Derek's dad was the only man in the ward willing to serve as Scoutmaster and Explorer leader. He always chose his son as quorum president, and Derek always chose his two best friends as counselors. Not quite the faith-promoting story of divine inspiration for Church callings that Mark had been told. Instead of blaming myself for not being a perfect parent, I now recognized that imperfect Church programs also played a role in my children's loss of testimony.

As our sons grew older and progressively less religious, I gave up hoping that the sealing ties would eventually, possibly in the next life, bring them back to the LDS faith. What I prayed for was that they could find some kind of positive faith that would sustain them in this life.

Ironically, reading the scriptures to gain a testimony opened the door for Mark to leave his childhood faith. The bishop who had refused to give Mark a temple recommend because his faith was not strong enough challenged Mark to read the scriptures. Mark bought several translations of the New Testament and plunged into study. He found Paul's teachings on grace, election, and an omnipotent God who couldn't be manipulated by human behavior far different from the Mormon doctrine he'd been taught. Then he reread the Book of Mormon and concluded that it really had no positive doctrine that differed from the New Testament. He also found plenty of negative doctrine he objected to, such as the beheading of Laban and the book's racism. I shared with him a list of Book of Mormon passages that I believe add insights not found in the New Testament, but Mark remained unconvinced.

After the New Testament, Mark bought a Jewish Study Bible and dived into the Old Testament. He soon found some real discrepancies between Mormon traditions and ancient Jewish practices. The first thing he noticed was that the description of the Urim and Thummim in the Old Testament bore no resemblance to the Urim and Thummin described by Joseph Smith. The Old Testament describes the Urim and Thummim as a divination tool for receiving yes and no answers to questions, essentially

by casting lots. Other findings troubled him such as learning that scholars believe there were two Isaiahs, the second one writing after the Diaspora, a fact his institute teacher hotly disputed until Mark found a reference to it in an old institute manual. Mark therefore questioned how the second Isaiah's writings could have been on the brass plates Lehi and his family took from Jerusalem between 600 and 592 B.C. Other problem areas he found were the lack of historically reliable references to resurrection and atonement in the Old Testament. Bringing up these discrepancies in church classes did nothing for Mark's standing in his singles ward.

Mark returned to the New Testament; and Paul's words, especially Romans, resonated forcefully with him. If faith is a gift from God and he hadn't received it even after conscientiously striving to keep the commandments, maybe it wasn't his fault. Maybe he didn't have to accept Mormon guilt that he wasn't worthy enough. Maybe it was just God's will. From studying genetics and from life experiences, Mark also doubted the LDS view of free agency. He perceived that much of what we regard as choice is influenced by factors outside our control, such as heredity and past experience. When he read St. Augustine and then John Calvin's works, he was delighted to find they agreed with his views and became convinced that they, not the Latter-day Saints, had the correct interpretation of the Bible. He attended a Lutheran study class and visited other mainstream Christian churches before finding a Reformed Protestant (Calvinist) Church whose doctrine corresponded with his own beliefs. He was accepted as a member, joined several study groups, took evening classes, and volunteered for cleaning duty on Saturday mornings.

Mark's study of the Bible intrigued Andrew. For some reason, Andrew can accept the inerrancy of the Bible although he cannot accept LDS doctrines—possibly because his Protestant Church doesn't emphasize submitting to earthly authority and doesn't emphasize obedience for the sake of earning a reward—two concepts Andrew has rejected since early childhood.

Jim and I sometimes wonder how long Andrew will be able to conform to his new church. The moral standards of our sons' Reformed Church are similar to those of the LDS Church—no premarital sex, the husband is head of the household and should earn the living, large families are the ideal, drug use and excessive drinking are frowned upon. At least for now, Andrew has given up his bad habits, substituting church attendance and study groups for hanging out in bars. He's looking for a

good, Christian wife. Like Mark, Andrew likes the idea that God saves us by his good grace, not for worthiness on our part. We obey God because of love for him rather than to earn rewards or to escape punishment. Maybe exposing Andrew to an altruistic philosophy during childhood paved the way for his return to a Christian faith.

Like new Mormon converts, my sons are anxious to share their new-found faith with family members. While visiting them, Jim and I attended services at their church and expressed our appreciation for the experience. "If you lived here, would you attend Mars Hill Church every Sunday?" Mark queried. "No," I instantly blurted out.

Like any parent, I hate disappointing my children, but for me, strict Calvinism has many similarities to practices I dislike about the LDS Church. Why would I switch to another church that teaches patriarchal society, literal interpretation of Biblical miracles, Old Testament morality, and the conviction that only one path leads to God? Calvinism also lacks the LDS doctrines I do value, especially the doctrines of agency, the eternal existence of intelligences, the light of Christ in all people, and a God who did not create the universe from nothing and who did not, therefore, create the evil in the world. I find it far easier to believe in a just God who rewards and punishes us based on what we do in this life rather than in a God who elects to save only a particular group of people for his own, inexplicable purpose.

Both of our sons are happy with their new religion. Except when they worry about my unsaved soul, I am happy with their decision. I truly believe that God knows how diverse his children are and that one way cannot possibly work for all of us. I believe he has inspired good people throughout the ages with religious ideas and ideals that have helped us live better lives, and I believe he will continue to do so in the future. Mormonism works for me and Jim; it did not work for our sons. Neither did agnosticism. Finding a Christian faith they can accept and where they feel comfortable has given them hope by which to guide their lives. For this I am grateful.