

thus making it a nice complement. Those who may have found the Givenses' prose too lofty may find Mason's utilitarian style more relatable. Significantly, the publication of *Planted* shows a continued interest from Deseret Book, as well as scholars, to reach out to members who may find themselves marginalized due to their sincere questions and doubts. I recommend *Planted* for those who need an empathetic voice and those who want to develop an empathetic voice for others.



## [Walking the Narrow Path](#)

Patrick Q. Mason. *Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015. 215 pp.  
Paperback: \$15.99. ISBN: 978-1629721811.

*Reviewed by Brad J. Tharpe*

*The following comments were delivered at a book launch event held on the campus of Claremont Graduate University on January 16, 2016. This version retains the oral nature of those original remarks.*

While reading *Planted* one evening, I turned to my wife, Sara, and said, "I think that we are in the book." I was reading an anecdote that Patrick shares near the end about some non-LDS Christian friends who attend a ward Christmas party. As they observe people talking and children running around, the friends comment on how much they admire the community because it feels like a real family (170). I remember making those comments. The reason that we did so is that, in our nearly four years in Claremont, Sara and I have not only observed, but we have experienced, the authentic connection and the faithful commitment of the Mormon community. Whether it be working alongside the stake president on the Claremont Interfaith Council, observing the work of the

LDS Institute director with Claremont students, attending a ward event, or talking with friends while our children misbehave, we have seen and been embraced by this engaged, compassionate, and thoughtful family of faith. Because of this experience and because I find his work to be so essential and timely, I am very grateful to Patrick for the opportunity to engage with this powerful text, and I am privileged this evening to be here with you. Thank you.

Though written primarily to the Mormon community, Patrick states in the second sentence that some of what this book addresses is “applicable to all people of faith trying to chart a course in the modern world, so other people are welcome to listen in” (1). As I read this book, I attempted to do just that—to “listen in” for the similarities, for the patterns, and for the approaches that are applicable to my own faith community. I want to briefly share some of what I heard and how it connects with my own observations and experiences.

To follow Patrick’s lead, some self-disclosure here is important: I am a mainline Protestant Christian, an ordained Baptist minister. As I often say to others, particularly once they pick up on my accent, I am a Baptist from the south, but I am not a Southern Baptist. The overall arc of my story is not uncommon. I was raised in a rural southern cultural milieu in which everyone was Christian. Out of my own experience as a college student, I was attracted to, then studied, then served, in mainline Protestantism. The vast majority of my work has been done in higher education, working with both undergraduate and graduate students in secular institutions. Though rooted in my own tradition, my role has always been to support persons of all faith traditions or no faith tradition. I read *Planted* from this perspective, which is shaped by my own community and my experience with college students. Like Patrick, however, I hope that many of the patterns I describe can apply to other traditions and communities as well.

As I have “listened in” through this text, I feel that I have gained a good deal of information and insight; I feel that I have learned more

about Mormon theology, polity, Christology, and ecclesiology. Though I have a long way to go, this book helped me learn how to ask better questions of my Mormon friends, colleagues, and students. The true gift of this book to me, however, is not the content around any particular set of issues but in the method that it clearly articulates. Here, Patrick offers us not so much a set of answers to difficult issues as he does a strategy, a method, an approach, for being people of faith, for being a religious community, in the modern world. He encourages us, he teaches us, he may even be admonishing us, to make room for doubt, for faith struggle, in our families and churches. He calls on us to ask, *How can we make ourselves and our communities more embracing while remaining true to our sense of God's calling and to the Church?* He is asking us, with integrity, to open our arms to those who are asking deep and difficult questions, and he outlines for us a method, an embracing approach, for doing so.

The first place of deep resonance that I find in this embracing approach is accepting, even valuing, doubt. In many ways, Patrick's affirming, but not glorifying, view of doubt is the foundation for this book and his methodology. He notes that some people have a kind of gift of faith that does not include major questions or times of doubt. Others, however, struggle with faith, particularly at various times in life. After making several persuasive arguments, he states, "Doubt is thus less a problem in need of a solution than a common part of the mortal experience that should, like all things, be treated with charity and ultimately consecrated to God" (7).

In college chaplaincy, what I often felt was my most sacred task was to sit down with an individual to discuss their faith struggles, to walk with them through times of doubt and deep questioning. After listening, my first response is to offer empathy; experiences of doubt can be painful and displacing. My next response, however, is to value and affirm their questions, and I believe that God does as well. For people to ask questions, to engage fully in a difficult experience of doubt, means that they are taking their faith, and by extension taking God, seriously. An experience

of doubt means that one believes enough, and more importantly *cares* enough, to ask difficult questions. When a father is asking Jesus to heal his son in the Gospel of Mark, the worried parent cries out, “I believe, help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24). As in that story, an honest and faithful statement by one who is struggling can lead to healing and wholeness.

In this context of accepting and even affirming doubt, Patrick uses Richard Bushman’s aptly-named categories for what might inspire or encourage doubt: people can become “switched off” or “squeezed out” (2). Let me take just a few moments to explore with you how I see these overlapping categories embodied in my experience and in my community.

As Patrick describes them, persons who are “switched off” have been turned off by a part of the Church’s history or doctrine. These persons learn new information or have new experiences that cause them to question the Church’s teachings or past. For my broader community, persons get “switched off” for a number of reasons. For instance, many people struggle to align the methods and conclusions of science with their understanding of Christianity; this includes, of course, issues around creation and evolution. More subtly and often more substantively, however, apparent contradictions between science and faith lead persons to ask deep questions about the authority of scripture and the role and place of humanity in the world. Another major issue that “switches off” people is the apparent exclusivity of faith and the potential of eternal damnation. Someone meets a sincere, loving person of another religious tradition and sets this experience against an understanding of the Christian tradition that places such people in eternal punishment. Lastly, and perhaps common to us all, is the question of the existence of evil. Often around the time someone is in college or graduate school, they are experiencing, or are being confronted with, the reality of suffering for the first time. Perhaps a parent or close family member or friend dies. Perhaps they put themselves in a situation where they see real people, not just images on a screen, in deep, deep suffering. This not only inspires questions

about “why bad things happen to good people” but also questions about God’s sovereignty and God’s ability to work in the world.

Often connected to being “switched off,” doubt is inspired or encouraged in others because they are “squeezed out.” People who are “squeezed out” do not feel that they “fit in” in the religious community. This is often, though not always, about more present issues than past issues. Here I think the difficulties span many religious traditions. To name just a few: there are deep divisions over the role of women, the nature of marriage and the family, and questions about how to minister to and with our LGBTQ sisters and brothers. In my experience, however, a less-discussed divisive force that “squeezes” persons out is the perceived and sometimes real correlation of political ideology with a religious community. This linkage, again sometimes real and sometimes perceived, between religious belief, church affiliation, and political persuasion has alienated many. When others, including fellow church members, assume that you are a Republican because you are a member of one church or a Democrat because you are a part of another, people often find it difficult to feel that they have a place in church.

In addition to persons who are “switched off” or “squeezed out,” the embracing approach that Patrick lays out for us applies to another growing group: those who were never “switched on” or who were never “in.” When I first started working in college chaplaincy, most of the students who did not identify with a faith tradition were reacting against something; they were rejecting, or had been rejected by, a set of religious beliefs or a religious community. They doubted something or Someone. Now, more and more, students aren’t rejecting a faith or religious community; they simply don’t see why faith is important at all. Neither they nor their families have been religiously engaged in any way. Their only impressions are formed by broader media influences, and those often aren’t positive images. Faith or participation in a religious community is not even something that they have seriously considered; it isn’t a salient question in their lives. For them, faith isn’t a struggle; it

is simply irrelevant. Patrick's embracing approach, his methodology for walking alongside those who are experiencing doubt while maintaining one's own integrity, is applicable both to those who are "switched off" or "squeezed out" *and* to those who were never "on" or "in."

In addition to what he describes explicitly, however, there are two underlying dimensions of his book that I think are helpful and necessary when dealing with those experiencing doubt or those who haven't even considered faith. The first is that faith asks everything of us. Religious commitment should be the center around which all of our lives are built. Faith calls us to engage our lives fully in following God and living in service to others. Too often, faith gets relegated to one dimension of wellness—it is only as important as eating well or exercising. Particularly in my own community, we have tried to accommodate people's schedules and needs so much that we hesitate to ask too much of them. Faith is so much more than a wellness practice or an activity to place alongside the swim team, the orchestra, or Sunday football. Our faith commitment should be the very core of our lives. None of us does this perfectly (at least I do not), but the call of God is one that demands it all. God asks nothing less from us than everything.

Patrick illustrates this point many times in the text but perhaps never more explicitly than when discussing some of the people who have influenced his own faith and displayed deep commitment to the Church. For instance, consider Richard Bushman's statement, "What I believe is not distinct from what I am" (138) and Lowell Bennion's focus on practical theology and the interplay of theology and religion. In these places and many others, Patrick reminds us that faith is the very framework for life and should be our starting and ending point. The all-encompassing nature of committed faith—the idea that faith comes with costs—can be attractive to people and maybe particularly to young people. In my experience with students, they want a higher calling; they want something to which they can give themselves fully. The Church should be and could be just that.

The second underlying and strong dimension of Patrick's book that I see as essential to this embracing approach is to create contexts for "beholding." Like the all-encompassing nature of faith, people who are struggling with doubt or those who have never even explored faith want and need to behold—to behold the wonder, the greatness, the mystery, the awesomeness of God. In our often hyper-rational, over-medicated, media-numbed world, some of us need to behold again; others of us need to behold for the first time the Great I AM, the Alpha and the Omega. Barbara Brown Taylor, a renowned Episcopal priest, professor, and preacher, describes beholding in her book *Leaving Church*. She states, "Whether the narratives starred hayseed shepherds confronted by hosts of glittering angels or desert pilgrims watching something like a dove descend upon a man in a river, . . . Christian faith seemed to depend on beholding things that were clearly beyond belief."<sup>6</sup> You may have heard some of these words:

"Behold, you shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Jesus." (Matthew 1:23)

"Behold, there came wise men from the east." (Matthew 2:1)

"Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29)

After placing a crown of thorns on the head of the Savior, Pontius Pilate says, "Behold the man!" (John 19:5)

In his book, particularly when he speaks of the necessity and wonder of hope, Patrick leads us to behold the Source of all hope (126ff). When he writes of the centrality of Christ and Christ's sacrifice, he leads us to behold the Crucified One (119ff). Though present more subtly, beholding undergirds the belief and belonging that helps us all to be rooted, to be planted, and it can help others to do the same.

In conclusion, the young people with whom I have worked long for a connection with others that is deeper than having a photo or post

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6. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 109–10.

“liked” online. They long for an affirmation of their worth larger than their grades or their résumé. They long for something that will ask more of them than their money, their fleeting attention, or a good review. The people with whom I have worked of any age, and frankly of any background, want a place where they can fully engage the complexities of belief, they want a community in which they can belong without having to hide a part of who they are, they want a vision and a mission that will demand nothing less than everything, and they want to behold something or Someone so wondrous that it will take all of this life and eternity to stand in The Presence.

In this book, Patrick is inspiring and instructing us to walk “the narrow path”—not a path between two theological or ideological poles, but the faithful path of being true to one’s self, true to one’s community, true to God, and yet able to fully embrace others. As one who is striving to follow Jesus, I pray that my community and I will have the wisdom, courage, and passion to follow this narrow path as well.



## Mormonism from Varied Fictional Perspectives

William Morris. *Dark Watch and Other Mormon-American Stories*. A Motley Vision, 2015. 124 pp. E-book: \$2.99. ISBN: 1230000389716.

*Reviewed by Jonathan Langford*

Short story collections are a medium well suited to explorations of Mormonism as a culture and what it means to be Mormon. They allow for diversity. They impose few limitations. They permit an author to change focus and perspective as desired, zoom in on specific details,