

Why I Belong, and Why I Believe

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As I have progressed through my life, my commitment to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has deepened for two reasons. The first is my reason for *belonging* to the church as an organized institution: because of the way the church is organized, it puts opportunities to help others in my path every day. It facilitates my efforts – and in some instances almost compels me – to *practice* Christianity, not just believe in it. The second is my reason for *believing* that the doctrines taught in the church are true. As I have studied the Bible and the Book of Mormon, I have come to know through the power of the Spirit of God, that these books contain the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. My conviction has deepened as I have continued to study these books and have tried to do the will of my Father in Heaven.

Why do I choose to belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as an organized religion, rather than attempt as an individual to live a good life? It is because the church helps me understand and practice the essence of Christianity. The mechanism by which the organization achieves this is to have no professional clergy. We don't hire ministers or priests to teach and care for us. This forces us to teach and care for each other – and in my view, this is the core of Christian living as Christ taught it. I actually have come to feel badly for my friends who belong to faiths in which professional clergy are employed – because they don't know how much joy they miss when they “outsource” the teaching and care of the members of their church to specially trained professionals.

Several years ago I read a story in a news magazine about flooding in several western states that resulted from the rapid spring melting of a heavy accumulation of snow. One photo showed thousands of Mormon citizens in Salt Lake City who had been mobilized with only a few hours' notice through a call from their local church leaders. They were shown filling sandbags that would channel the flow of run-off water. The article marveled at the command-and-control precision – almost military in character – through which the LDS church was able to put its people onto the front lines of this civil crisis. Another photo in an article the next week showed a thirty-something resident of a town along a flooding stream in another state, sitting in a lawn chair reading while national guardsmen filled sandbags nearby. The author of the article attributed what he saw to the “organizational efficiency” of the LDS church, but he completely missed the point. Thousands of people instinctively showed up and went to work *because they do this sort of thing all the time, week after week, in over a hundred countries around the world, as part of being Mormon*. This was not an unusual event – just another week in the life of a typical Mormon.

To illustrate, let me review some of the things that I was able to do in the normal course of being a member of this church in a recent year. Because graduate students and young families move into and out of apartments with regularity in the Boston area, a list gets passed around at church every few weeks, asking for men to show up the next Saturday to help some family load or unload their rented moving truck. My children and I signed up every time, and worked shoulder to shoulder with five to fifteen other men and their children for two or three hours, helping the family move. At least once each month and more often when needed, I visited by assignment an elderly Hispanic couple – a woman who was in poor health, whose husband was struggling to overcome his addiction to alcohol. They lived in a dilapidated apartment in a rough part of the city. Over the course of the year the men in our congregation re-plastered, re-wired, painted and re-carpeted their apartment. We contributed money to fly their grown children, who were struggling financially and living in other parts of the country, to a special family reunion we helped them organize in Washington, D.C. Every Sunday for two hours, I cared for about 14

children aged 18-36 months in the church's nursery, so that their parents could attend Sunday School class in peace. My wife Christine was similarly engaged. In the assignment she had at that time, when she learned that a mother had a new baby or someone was otherwise ill, with just a few phone calls she would enlist people to appear on their doorstep for a day, a week or for months. They would bring meals ready to eat, or hands ready to clean their homes and do the family's laundry.

The important point about the prior paragraph is that our experience was *not* unusual. *Everyone* in the congregation was similarly serving, not just accepting assignments to help, but seeking opportunities to help. We gave often, and received often. For example, a short time later our family had out-grown our small home, so we found a larger one and put the word out that we would appreciate any help in loading and unloading our rented moving truck. Among those who showed up that morning was Mitt Romney, now the governor of Massachusetts, who had just completed his unsuccessful campaign for the U.S. Senate in Massachusetts. Mitt had a broken collarbone, but for two hours traipsed between our home and the truck, carrying out whatever he could manage with his one good arm. That spirit is just in the air in the Mormon Church, week after week, year after year. The strong help the weak, and the weak help the strong, and nobody thinks about who is weak and who is strong. It creates an extraordinary spirit of mutual love, because as we work to help others who are in need, our love and respect for those we help intensifies.

My children have been raised not just by their parents, but by an entire community of remarkable people. One of the world's foremost materials scientists, the dean of the Harvard Business School, a podiatrist, and the executive vice president of American Express Corporation were our sons' boy scoutmasters. These men of substance and position selflessly taught my sons first aid and citizenship, and camped with them in the snow. Each of our children during their high school years went to "early morning seminary" – scripture study classes that met in the home of a church member every school day morning from 6:30 until 7:15. The women who taught these classes had degrees not in religion or theology, but in art, law, nursing and literature. They had spent several hours the day before, preparing and searching for a way to help the sleepy high school students the next morning learn an element of the gospel more deeply, and to send them off to school with a firmer resolve to do what is right. Christine and I haven't raised our children. A whole community of selfless Christians has contributed to helping them become faithful, competent adults. Whenever we have thanked these men and women for what they have done for us, without exception they have expressed gratitude for having the chance to help – because *they* grew as they served.

Because we employ no professional preachers, it means that every sermon or lesson in church is given by a regular member – women and men, children and grandparents. This means that we have the chance to learn from *everyone* – people in all walks of life who are struggling in their own ways to follow God. I have found, in fact, that some of the most profound things I have learned about the gospel of Jesus Christ have come from people from whom, if judged by the standards of the world, you would not have expected such profundities to come. For example, about a decade ago I was serving as the bishop, or lay minister, of the congregation of college students in the Boston area. We had assigned a college sophomore to give a sermon about repentance in our service on a particular Sunday. I still remember his key point: "We often view repentance as a slow process. It isn't. Change is instantaneous. It is *not* changing that takes so much time." I had been struggling to overcome a particular bad habit; and I resolved that I would change my behavior right then and there – to quit "not changing." Where else but in this church could a young, inexperienced student have taught a bishop such a profound lesson?

I believe very strongly that these Mormons that I have described are *not* more loving or more selfless or more competent than many, many individuals in other faiths. What is different, however, is that we live and serve within a context that causes us to *use* those attributes – to serve, rather than to be served. And as we use them, they become an even more powerful part of us.

One of the curses that afflicts successful, prosperous people – many of whom have extraordinary talents and good hearts – is that they tend to live and work amongst similarly successful, prosperous people. They thereby become isolated from those who need their help. What I appreciate about the Mormon Church as an infrastructure for Christian living is that it puts me in touch with people I can help. I told a friend once, “If you truly want to live your life as Christ taught, then start coming to the Mormon Church. You don’t even have to believe what we believe. But if you want to practice Christianity, *this* is where the state-of-the-art is practiced.” This is why I choose to *belong* to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The second topic I want to address is why I *believe* in the doctrines of the church. I was born into a wonderful Mormon family, and as I grew up I found few reasons to disbelieve the teachings of the church. My parents had deep faith in its precepts, and their example and encouragement were powerful – I believed in my parents, and I knew that they believed the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was not until I was 24, however, that I came to know these things for myself.

I had been given a Rhodes Scholarship to study at Oxford University in England. After I had lived there for a few weeks, far away from the supportive environment in which I had been raised, it became clear that adhering to Mormonism in that environment was going to be *very* inconvenient. In fact, doing the sorts of things I described in the first part of this essay within the Mormon congregation in Oxford would preclude my participation in many of the things that had made Oxford such a rich experience for prior recipients of my scholarship. I decided, as a result, that the time had come for me to learn for certain and for *myself* whether Mormonism was true.

I had read the Book of Mormon before – seven times, to be exact. But in each of those instances I had read it by assignment – from my parents or a teacher – and my objective in reading it was to finish the book. This time, however, my objective was to find out if it was a true book or a fabrication. Accordingly, I reserved the time from 11:00 until midnight, every night, to read the Book of Mormon next to the fireplace in my chilly room at the Queen’s College. I began each of those sessions by kneeling in verbal prayer. I told God, every night, that I was reading this to know if it was His truth. I told Him that I *needed* an answer to this question – because if it was not true I did not want to waste my time with this church and would search for something else. But if it *was* true, then I promised that I would devote my life to following its teachings, and to helping others do the same.

I then would sit in the chair and read a page in the Book of Mormon. I would stop at the bottom of the page and think about it. I would ask myself what the material on that page meant for the way I needed to conduct my life. I would then get on my knees and pray aloud again, asking the Lord to tell me if the book was true. I would then get back in the chair, turn the page, and repeat the process, for the remainder of the hour. I did this every evening.

After I had done this for several weeks, one evening in October, 1975, as I sat in the chair and opened the book following my prayer, I felt a marvelous spirit come into the room and envelop my body. I had never before felt such an intense feeling of peace and love. I started to cry, and did not want to stop. I knew then, from a source of understanding more powerful than anything I had ever felt in my life, that the book I was holding in my hands was true. It was hard to see through the tears. But as I opened it and began again to read, I saw in the words of the book a clarity and magnitude of God’s plan for us that I had never conceived before. The spirit stayed with me for that entire hour. And each night thereafter, as I prayed and then sat in that chair with the Book of Mormon, that same spirit returned. It changed my heart and my life forever.

It was as if I had been looking out as far as I could see toward the horizon, and had been quite satisfied that I could see everything that there was to see. When I undertook to read the Book of Mormon

in that manner, however, I discovered that *so* much more beauty and truth about who we are and what God has in store for us, lies beyond that old horizon. I did not know what I did not know.

I love to go back to Oxford. As the beautiful, historic home of the world's oldest university, the town is filled with students and tourists. To me, however, it is a sacred place. It is there that I learned that the fundamental message of the Book of Mormon is in fact true – that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. It is there that I learned that God is indeed my Father in Heaven. I am His son. He loves me, and even knows my name. And I learned that Joseph Smith, the man who translated the Book of Mormon and organized the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was a prophet of God in the same sense that Peter and Moses were prophets. I love to return to Oxford to remember the beautiful, powerful spirit that came to my heart and conveyed these messages to me.

During my adult life I have been blessed to witness or participate in many miracles – events that the scriptures term “gifts of the Spirit.” I have healed the sick by the power of the God. I have spoken with the gift of tongues. I have been blessed to see visions of eternity; and events in my future that have been important for me to foresee, have been revealed to me. These truly have been gifts, and have been great blessings in my life. But when I assess the collective impact that they have had on my faith, my heart, and my motivation to follow Jesus Christ, they pale in significance and power to those evenings I spent with the Book of Mormon in Oxford.

This happened to me a quarter of a century ago. I am grateful to be able to say that in the years since, I have continued systematically to study the Book of Mormon and Bible to understand even more deeply what God expects of me and my family while on this earth. I have spent thousands of hours doing my best to share what I am learning with others, and to serve others in the way that Christ wants. And I am grateful to say that, from time to time, that same spirit that permeated my heart in Oxford has returned – reconfirming that the path I am trying so hard to follow is in fact the one that God my Father and His Son Jesus Christ want me to pursue. It has brought me deep happiness. This is why I belong, and why I believe. I commend to all this same search for happiness and for the truth.