

Why I Left the Mormon Church

by Brandon Pearce

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The Pearce Family. Photo taken in March, 2012 in Bali, Indonesia.

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Introduction

If you know me, you may be surprised to learn that I have left the LDS (Mormon) church, and you might be wondering what would cause a fully committed 100% active member to do so. Let me state upfront that it's not because of sin, money, being offended, or reading anti-Mormon books. I loved the church, was happy in it, saw almost no wrong in it, and tried to live my life as much in compliance with its teachings as I possibly could. I served an honorable mission to Japan, was married in the Temple and started a family soon after. At the time I left the church, I was serving as the 1st counselor in a branch presidency. Almost all my family and friends were members of the church, and had been for generations, back to the pioneer days. At age 30, leaving was certainly not an easy decision, and I did not make it lightly.

In this letter, I'm going to share with you the events and thought processes that led me to leave the church. Then I'll list the beliefs I've abandoned and kept, things I miss from the church, and the benefits I feel I've gained from leaving. Finally, I'll discuss how my current belief system is evolving, and why I considered but rejected the idea of coming back to the church.

Don't worry, the purpose of this letter isn't to convince you to leave the church. This is a personal story about me, and by sharing my reasons, I don't mean to imply that you should leave, too. The church benefits many people, and I completely respect those who choose to stay active. However, if you are a believing member of the church, this document may be difficult for you to read, and may stir up uncomfortable emotions as I describe the details that caused me to leave. It's possible that this document could enhance your belief in Mormonism, but most likely, it will hurt it. Unfortunately, we tend to tie our identity to the beliefs we treasure, and it's easy to feel attacked personally when those beliefs are rejected by someone else. So please remember that just because my feelings about the church have changed, my feelings about you probably have not. So please try not to take this letter personally.

My reason for leaving can be summed up by saying that I no longer believe that the church is what it claims to be. This document explains how I came to that conclusion and how that's affected me. If this idea troubles you, rather than interests you, then you may want to stop reading at the end of this Introduction. Otherwise, you may be offended at what I have to say.

The reason I'm sharing this document is to make sure there are no misunderstandings about why I left the church. When someone leaves a church like Mormonism, it's common for members to judge that person's decisions with their own experience, imposing negative and untrue labels such as "naïve," "lost," "delusional," "anti-Mormon," or even "sinful." If you do this, it will be difficult for you to see my story rationally and with empathy. Church members may look at me and see someone who's been deceived and taken captive by the devil. Non-members may see someone coming to their senses and following their integrity. Who's to say who is right? Each is viewing the situation through their own filters of reality. Unless you're willing to honestly consider the truthfulness of another perspective, you'll never fully understand it.

Think about it. If you don't ever question your beliefs and consider that you could be wrong, how can you ever be sure that you're right? Until you step into someone else's shoes completely, you won't truly understand their point of view. You'll only understand your version of their point of view, which is filtered and biased by your past experiences. This does not lead to truth, it only reinforces what you want to believe. But we all do this. We see what we want to see even though we sometimes think we don't. However, with important matters like eternal salvation and the purpose of life, I think it's essential that we step outside the mold of our current viewpoint and honestly consider other perspectives to see if they have any value.

When you read something that counters your current beliefs, it's natural to get emotional and defensive. But remember that emotion is the enemy of objectivity, and it prevents us from seeing clearly. If you firmly "know" the church is 100% true already, then you've made your decision and closed off your mind to any ideas that challenge that statement, even if those ideas are true. You may read a statement and brush it off as unimportant or even untrue if it conflicts with what you believe, rather than consider it and test it objectively. Or you may give it a half-hearted testing because you don't really want it to be true. Of course I think it's healthy to take everything you read with a grain of salt, and I don't expect anyone who reads this to care enough about my perspective that they would want to risk giving up their present belief system. But please realize that unless you're willing to take off your current glasses and see a new perspective, you'll only ever see the version of reality you now see, and you'll have a hard time understanding where I'm coming from in this letter.

Interestingly, this "changing the glasses" process is similar to what the LDS church asks investigators to do when considering the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. We're told to ask in faith, believing the book is true, without any doubt, and then we'll get our answer. Essentially, we're told to put on LDS glasses in order to see that the church is true. It seems only fair to apply the same practice to other points of view. If you want to understand why I left the church, then I invite you to put on non-Mormon glasses and honestly consider how the church might not be true, rather than brushing all such statements aside. Once you do, then you can couple that with the knowledge you already have about Mormonism, and be in a much better place to determine for yourself if what I'm saying is accurate and if the LDS church is what it claims to be.

What you do or believe after reading this letter is up to you. This document is the result of much study and effort, and it has been therapy for me to get my thoughts written down. But it was not easy for me to come to this decision. While I'll be presenting to you the persuasive arguments I faced in my journey out of the church, I don't expect most readers to be persuaded in the same direction.¹ But I do hope it will cause you think and re-evaluate your beliefs and why you have them. If you would rather not do this, or if you fear losing your faith, then please don't read further, because I'm about to show you exactly how my faith was destroyed, and how I dealt with it. For those who are still with me, I hope you will find my journey thought-provoking and enlightening.

¹ For a summary of the responses I received when I first announcement of this document, see my blog post [Reactions to Radical Decisions](#).

Part I: What Caused Me to Leave?

Drawing Closer to the Spirit

I have always tried to live my life according to the Spirit. I listened mostly to uplifting music (which for me was usually hymns and Classical music) so that I could keep the Spirit with me. I kept my church clothes on all day Sunday to remind myself to be more reverent on the Sabbath. I studied the scriptures almost every morning, and had read the Book of Mormon eight times before I left on my mission. I devoured church books in my teen years, and even worked at Deseret Book for a time. There were periods of my life where I attended the Temple multiple times per week, and have always been a habitual pray-er, offering prayers at almost every pause in thought. The church was my life, and gospel perspectives influenced every decision I made, sometimes to the extreme. Of course I wasn't perfect. I was often judgmental of others, and fell into normal human tendencies at times. But I am guilty of no serious sins, and always tried as hard as I could to live the gospel as I understood it.

One of the main motivations for my behavior was the Spirit and my love for God. I loved the warm, peaceful feelings I felt when reading scriptures, attending church, the Temple, and doing service. I felt like God was pleased with me when He filled me with His love. I also enjoyed receiving guidance from the Holy Ghost to direct my life, even though I didn't always understand what God was trying to tell me. I was taught in church, and subsequently taught others as a missionary, that the warm, peaceful feelings we feel -- such as the burning in the bosom -- are the Spirit of God communicating that whatever we are doing, thinking, or feeling in that moment is "true." We taught Moroni 10:3-5, which states that if we read the Book of Mormon and ask about it with sincerity, the Holy Ghost will tell us if the book is true. As a missionary, if we could get people to feel a peaceful feeling when they pray (or at any time, really), we were eager to point out that it's the spirit telling them that our message, and our church, is true, in a literal and absolute sense. These feelings are the foundation of a testimony for many members, as they were for me. I've also felt my heart fill with love for others in response to prayer, fill with joy while singing hymns and religious music, and fill with peace as I've prayed for forgiveness. Because of all these experiences, I had no doubt that the church was exactly what it claimed to be, "the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, with which I, the Lord, am well pleased."¹

I have felt these spiritual feelings regularly and powerfully throughout my life. But I've also had a few key spiritual experiences that were unusually powerful, and became an anchor to my testimony. One of these was at a testimony meeting for graduating seminary students. As I bore my testimony over the pulpit that "this church is so true," I felt an incredibly strong power within me, tingles all over my body, warm, peaceful, and joyful feelings in my heart, and felt almost as if I could fly. My arms felt very light as if they were floating. Although difficult to describe, I had no doubt that this was the Spirit of God communicating with me. Another experience occurred when a certain girl and I sat on the Temple grounds and made the decision to be married after our missions. As we did this, we both felt the Spirit powerfully confirm our decision through the same tingling, warm, and joyful feelings, and then re-confirm it again multiple times in the weeks

¹ Doctrine & Covenants 1:30

that followed, both separately while praying, and together. Strangely, while I was on my mission, she chose to marry someone else she met on her mission, and I was confused about why she would go against a spiritual prompting she received so powerfully. I could only chalk it up to agency, or perhaps forgetfulness. Some church leaders I discussed this with questioned whether it was actually the Spirit that had been communicating with us, and that maybe it was just hormones, but I wasn't willing to consider that for many years because it would require me to also call into question my other spiritual experiences.

Shortly after I returned from my mission, my mom announced that she had left the church. I was surprised and saddened by her decision. I wondered how she could forget her spiritual experiences and go so far off the straight and narrow path. She said she was happier now than she'd ever been, but I couldn't believe her. I concluded that maybe she'd never felt the Spirit at all, or that she may have just forgotten what it felt like as she drifted away from the church. I increased my determination to never let that happen to me. Fortunately, years later, I was finally willing to understand, accept, and even respect her choices and that she was happy in them, which helped our relationship considerably.

In January 2010, after my online business grew enough to support my family, we (my wife and two kids at the time) sold almost all our possessions and moved to Costa Rica for better weather, a chance to learn a new language, experience a new culture, and grow closer together as a family. I found myself in a beautiful and relaxing environment, with more free time than I'd ever had before. I decided to use much of that time to improve myself spiritually. Specifically, I wanted to increase the influence of the Spirit in my daily life, learn to understand it better, and have more of the "constant companionship" we're promised. I wanted to be even more in tune with Lord's direction for me and fulfill the line in my Patriarchal blessing that stated, "You will enjoy the ability to distinguish the whisperings of the Spirit from other influences and then, because of your courage and integrity, you will move in directions that will be appropriate and beneficial." I was active at church and was soon called to serve in the Bishopric, which surprised me, especially because of my limited Spanish. But I enjoyed serving, and made some great friends there, too. During that time, I also wrote and recorded a few [hymn arrangements](#) for voice and piano which I felt brought the Spirit.

In the months that followed, I read several books about feeling and understanding the Spirit, receiving revelation, and understanding God's will. I studied, meditated, prayed, and gained some wonderful insights that helped me understand spiritual feelings more thoroughly, and better tune in to my body and its messages.

Contradictory Messages

However, by July 2010, I also became aware of some contradictions in what I had been taught my entire life concerning the Spirit. Specifically, I realized from my studies that there are people of other faiths who have experienced just as strong spiritual feelings as I have, and they have taken this as a witness that their beliefs are true -- yet those beliefs contradict what I believe. I knew that the "spirit of Christ is given to every man,"¹ but **I was confused at why the Spirit -- the testifier of truth -- would be contradicting himself by telling one person that his belief**

¹ Moroni 7:16

is true, and another person that his belief is also true, when those two beliefs oppose each other.

Think about that for a minute. How do you reconcile that?

I rationalized that others must be misinterpreting their feelings, or perhaps receiving communication from another source besides the “true” spirit. But in their stories, I honestly couldn’t see any difference between their descriptions of what they had felt, and what I had felt -- peace, warm, burning in the bosom, tingling, audible whisperings, a sure “knowing,” little signs that showed God was directing them, mighty changes of heart -- it was all there and just as powerful. And these experiences were leading people to completely different belief systems than mine. This made me start to doubt the source of my spiritual experiences, and I realized I had much more to understand.

Trying to make sense of things, I thought of the possibility that maybe spiritual feelings don’t testify of absolute truth or what is eternally “right,” but instead, maybe they tell us what is good or right for us at the time. For example, someone being prompted to join a protestant Christian church as a stepping stone to the true gospel. If the Spirit just leads us to goodness, rather than truth, then perhaps because other churches have some truth and good in them, their followers are feeling the Spirit about those elements and taking it to mean that their entire church is true. But this idea then makes the Spirit meaningless in demonstrating the “truth” of one religion over another. This also contradicts what the church and scriptures teach about how the Holy Ghost works and testifies of truth.¹ Further, if we’re led by degrees, how do I know that the LDS church isn’t just a stepping stone to something else that’s even more true?

Interpreting the Spirit

Of course, the Spirit doesn’t speak in concrete language, and is usually difficult to interpret. Even leaders of the LDS church disagree on certain “revealed” doctrinal matters, priesthood holders often get different vibes about the direction a priesthood blessing should go or who should receive a calling. Prophecies from leaders and promises in Patriarchal blessings sometimes go unfulfilled. As individuals, we get “revelations” that don’t come to pass, and we have confusing spiritual experiences. The fact is, we’re often wrong in our interpretation of spiritual feelings, even when we’re sure we’re not.

How do we really know where these spiritual feelings and promptings originate and what they mean? Are they really coming from a divine being outside of myself, communicating a specific message that I (and it appears even the leaders of the church) struggle to interpret? Or is it more of an emotional or psychological response to my surroundings or to how I feel about a particular idea? Is it the same thing as conscience or intuition that even non-religious people feel? And how can I know?

One thing became clear -- feelings themselves don’t actually prove whether something is true or false. If I felt something special while praying, I would usually take it to mean that what I prayed about is true. But with this same logic, if I felt something special watching a movie (and most

¹ See [D&C 9:8](#).

people do), then that fictional movie would also be true, which is nonsense. I realized that when I feel a good or bad feeling, there are a number of different interpretations I can place on it. It doesn't necessarily signify truth.

In fact, in the church we're taught that the Spirit has other purposes, including providing comfort, giving direction, and leading us away from danger. Maybe when I feel the Spirit during a movie, it is to provide comfort or give direction, rather than teach truth. But how do I know which it is? What's more, how do I know these feelings are coming from a Holy Ghost at all?

I can remember many times I've felt the Spirit while in nature, reading a non-LDS book, performing or listening to music, driving, stretching in the morning, relaxing with my kids at night, or even working on my computer -- things that have little to do with testifying of truth, giving direction, or providing comfort. Why would I feel the Spirit in these moments? Further, why do I often feel spiritual feelings when I'm doing "righteous" things like attending the Temple or reading the scriptures, yet sometimes I do not? What makes these elusive spiritual feelings come and go? Where do they really come from, and what do they mean? I wanted to know the answers to these questions.

The Breath of the Spirit

If you've seen the church movie, "The Testaments," there is a scene where the little girl is watching a man testify of Christ. You see her breathe heavily, in and out, with a twinkle in her eye and a smile on her glowing face, and you know she is feeling the Spirit. The first time I saw this image, it stuck with me because I realized that I often breathe like that when I feel the Spirit; deeper, more intense breaths.

I have since learned that through certain breathing exercises, **I can reproduce at will the same tingling sensations I felt during my most powerful "spiritual" experiences!** You can try it if you want. Breathe in slowly and deeply, like you're smelling a rose, then breathe out quickly like you're blowing out a candle. After a few breaths you'll feel more relaxed. But if you do this for 10-20 minutes, you will start to feel tingling in your hands and feet, legs, and even your mouth. You may start to feel light, like your arms are floating, or you may feel warm all over. It's an incredible feeling! But it's basically hyperventilation caused by a decrease of carbon dioxide in the blood. Of course, this has nothing to do with God speaking to you. But it feels wonderful and it's a great natural high. Next time you are feeling the Spirit, pay attention to how you are breathing, and see if it is different than normal.

Now, I'm not saying that every time I've felt peaceful or had a spiritual experience that it's the direct result of my breathing, as tingling is just one sensation out of many I have felt. But breathing does have a huge effect on how we feel. Deep breathing also releases dopamine in the brain, which relaxes us and can create feelings of peace and joy, and fast deep breathing has a different effect than slow deep breathing. Fasting and certain diets have also been linked to feelings of euphoria.¹ Since I started practicing meditation, I've noticed that many of the feelings I have while meditating are exactly the same feelings I have always identified as "the Spirit." But is it really the Holy Ghost communicating with me? If so, what is he saying?

¹ [http://www.medical-hypotheses.com/article/S0306-9877\(06\)00577-9/abstract](http://www.medical-hypotheses.com/article/S0306-9877(06)00577-9/abstract)

Burning in the Bosom

Scientists have coined the term “elevation” which describes warm, peaceful feelings in our heart that come when witnessing an event of kindness or heroism,¹ such as a young boy helping the homeless (or a god coming to earth to sacrifice his life for you); in other words, “heart-warming” stories. But the stories need not be true to elicit the feelings, and of course these feelings are not unique to Mormonism.

I’ve also realized that when I have felt warm feelings -- the burning in the bosom -- that I was often feeling devotion to God, worthiness, and that he was pleased with me. I felt honored to be giving myself to God to do His will and help others. It appears that strong feelings of love and devotion can create warm feelings, even when outside of a religious context. The feeling of awe created around big name church leaders or impressive buildings can also be interpreted as the Spirit. Drugs such as psilocybin (found in some mushrooms) and LSD are even shown to bring “spiritual” experiences of vivid and powerful emotions, and a feeling of joy and oneness with God.² If these spiritual experiences can be brought about at will in many testable ways -- and they can -- why should we assume that they’re coming from an outside source?

Negative Spiritual Feelings

Likewise, do our negative feelings mean the Holy Ghost is trying to warn us? Or the devil is trying to stop us? I felt a lot of negative feelings right after I became engaged to my wife, Jen, but I didn’t know where they were coming from. I wondered whether God was telling me I shouldn’t marry her, or if the devil was trying to stop me from having a celestial marriage. I figured that God doesn’t send powerful negative feelings, so it was probably the devil trying to stop me from marrying her, and I went ahead with the marriage. But I really had no idea. Perhaps our negative feelings are simply common emotions like fear, guilt, anger, or disgust. I certainly was afraid I wasn’t making the “right” marriage decision.

Maybe you are feeling negative emotions as you read this letter. It’s helpful to examine where those feelings are coming from, and what thoughts might be provoking them. Are you feeling confused? Attacked? Concerned? Anxious? Scared? Shocked? Outraged? Are these feelings coming from spiritual sources? Or could they just be your natural biological response to thoughts that are different from what you’re used to, or a response to being presented with information you don’t want to believe is true? Dismissing what you want to be true, is one explanation really more likely than the other? There are ways to get rid of negative feelings and feel spiritual feelings, such as relaxing your body, breathing deeply, quieting your mind, thinking more positive thoughts, or even distracting or medicating yourself. Where is the proof that a Holy Ghost is warning us, or that a devil is tempting us?

Holy Ghost vs. Emotion

Church members often wonder what the difference is between the Holy Ghost and emotions. This is a great question! Some members explain the contradictions I’ve mentioned above by suggesting that any spiritual feelings we feel in our body are not actually the Spirit, but simply our body’s reaction to the Spirit. The idea is that the Holy Ghost -- as a spirit -- communicates

¹ <http://www.oprah.com/spirit/Doing-Good-Deeds-Natural-Highs-How-to-Spread-Kindness>

² <http://www.samharris.org/blog/item/drugs-and-the-meaning-of-life/>

with our spirit directly, not with our body. And our body responds to the spiritual communication with peace, burning in the bosom, or other sensations.

I like this idea. This explains how we could be getting messages from something external and non-physical, but still experience its effects physically, and how some of these feelings could be “counterfeit Spirit,” or misinterpreted responses. This also explains how the Spirit could send thoughts to our minds, without any accompanying physical sensations. However, it still doesn’t get us any closer to knowing when the spirit is communicating with us; it just adds an additional layer of complexity. If we feel a spiritual feeling or even have a thought in our mind, we still have to wonder, “Is this my body’s response to the Spirit, or it is just a regular thought or emotion brought on by other means?” How do you tell the difference? In the end, the same question remains: When you feel what you think is the Holy Ghost, how can you be sure that it really is?

Synchronicities and Coincidences

Besides feelings and thoughts, many people experience events in their lives that they feel are too difficult to explain away as coincidence. Maybe you think or pray for something you need, and very soon after, you receive it. Someone comes into your life at just the right time. Or several events work together that seem like they were orchestrated perfectly for you. You might even have dreams about something that will happen in the future, and then you find it does happen. Or you get a horrible feeling that something bad has happened, then seconds later a phone call informs you that a loved one far away just got in an accident.

Maybe you’ve had some of these experiences. I’ve had some, and continue to have them. Actually, almost everyone seems to have these experiences to some degree, especially if they’re looking for them, regardless of religious beliefs or devotion to God. What is going on here?

When I see these experiences in my life, I can't really prove whether these events (or other spiritual feelings or thoughts) happen because of any of the following reasons:

- Divine Providence. God is watching out for all his children, cares for even the smallest events in our life, and orchestrates all situations for everyone’s greatest good, including animals and the earth itself.
- Random Chance. With all of the millions of events that happen each day, some are bound to match up just out of coincidence; or your mind is using its natural ability to find patterns in random events; or you’re selectively remembering the hits while forgetting the misses. For example, how many times have you had a hunch something would happen, or prayed for something, and it didn’t happen?
- Persistence. Don't give up, keep working toward your goals, and eventually you will get what you want. Your own efforts cause this, not anything else.
- “Law of Attraction” or Universal Energy. Thinking and hoping for these things causes the universe to respond with what you need when you need it (although this is pretty close to divine providence above, but the LDS version of God has been replaced with "energy" or the "universe," and prayer to God with positive thinking). Or the idea that everything in the universe, including thought, is connected through quantum particles, and sometimes

we are able to tap into this field of connection consciously and get access to information not available to the five senses.

Honestly, I'm still not sure where these feelings and events comes from, or how to explain them. But I have a hard time believing that they're coming from an LDS God / Holy Ghost because almost everyone has these types of experiences regardless of their religious beliefs. There are also people outside the church who teach others how to have these spiritual experiences,¹ and they seem to be more "in tune" with the Spirit than most LDS. You could say that God cares for all his children and sends his spirit and help to everyone regardless of religious beliefs, but that doesn't explain why the LDS view would be any more believable than another in relation to how these events take place, why God would give some people messages that contradict LDS doctrine, and why God would answer one person's prayer to help them find their car keys, while ignoring the prayer of a starving child who just wants a little rice.² It also does not prove that these communications are coming from a Holy Ghost.

Other people put different names to these experiences: Karma, Chance, Intuition, Energy, Allah, Jesus, God, the Universe, or the name of some saint or god who they believe is helping them. If other people experience the same spiritual experiences as an LDS person (and it appears they do), why is the LDS interpretation any more accurate than theirs at explaining where these experiences come from? How do you know which interpretation is the correct one? The scale of "by their fruits ye shall know them" doesn't really apply, because in almost every church and belief system there are amazing and happy people who live productive lives and raise healthy families.

Near-Death Experiences

I have never had a near-death experience (NDE), but I've read of many people who have. I used to think that everyone who had an NDE experienced the same things, regardless of religion or age. However, I've since learned that this is not exactly true. Yes, there are some remarkable similarities, but there are also some important differences which appear to be highly influenced by the person's culture and religious background.³ Most experience a feeling of peace, a tunnel, bright light, and sometimes beings of light (often family or loved ones). However, usually only Christians report seeing Jesus (or sometimes Mary if they're Catholic), Muslims report seeing Allah, and Hindus see a variety of gods.⁴ While explaining the phenomenon of the NDE away as a completely psychological experience poses its own set of problems (such as no measurable activity in the brain during the experience), it is also impossible to use near-death experiences as proof of the truth of Mormonism.

More Holy Ghost Problems

¹ Some examples include the [Silva Intuition System](#), the [Powered by Intuition blog](#), and the book [Developing Intuition](#). "Intuition" as defined here is inclusive of all types of spiritual communication I've been discussing.

² For an insightful attempt to answer this question, see <http://whywontgodhealamputees.com/>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Near-death_experience

⁴ <http://www.near-death.com/experiences/articles013.html>. See also, [Science and the Near Death Experience](#) by Chris Carter for an interesting summary of the research on this topic.

There are other aspects of the LDS doctrine of the Holy Ghost that were confusing to me. Here are some of the issues:

- **Sinners can still feel it.** We're told that when we sin, the Spirit leaves and we're unable to feel it (Helaman 4:24), but there are many people Mormons would consider sinful who do feel the Spirit, even in the very act of sinning. From drinking coffee to pre-marital sex, people worldwide have very different views of "sin" based on their culture and the rules they were taught growing up. Many of these people not only don't feel guilt, they actually feel close to God. How can this be if the "Spirit of God does not dwell in unholy temples?" Perhaps it's because they don't know what they're doing is wrong, so they're not accountable. In that case, maybe it would be better for us all to believe that nothing is wrong; then we could have the Spirit with us all the time! But no, Moroni says that the light of Christ fills every person and tells us which things are right and which are wrong. (Moroni 7:12-19) But if that were true, then how can anyone not be accountable, because innately, we already know what's wrong? This contradiction doesn't make sense. **If the Spirit leaves one person when he "sins," but not another -- because he doesn't believe it's a sin -- then this means the Holy Ghost isn't teaching the same thing to everyone, and isn't a reliable method for discerning truth, or even right from wrong.**
- **A constant companion.** Receiving the "gift of the Holy Ghost" doesn't seem to bring the Spirit any more frequently or intensely than before. When you look at it honestly, there seems to be no difference between how the light of Christ and the gift of the Holy Ghost are felt. Everyone supposedly has the light of Christ within them (D&C 84:46). But with the gift of the Holy Ghost, we're promised the right to constant companionship as long as we're worthy. Sure, no one is worthy 100% of the time, but there are times when we are perfectly worthy, yet we don't feel the spirit even in the very moments we're doing righteous acts for the right reasons with a heart full of love toward God. That is not constant. It's sporadic, and felt just as frequently whether you have the gift of the Holy Ghost or not. Some people say you get so used to having the Holy Ghost with you, that you don't recognize it unless it's gone. But that is no different than those without the gift of the Holy Ghost. They feel "normal" until they feel guilt or another negative emotion. Feeling normal doesn't mean you have a special spirit with you. The Gift of the Holy Ghost doesn't appear to be a real phenomenon or make any difference after bestowed, as far as I can tell. People feel spiritual feelings just as much with or without it.
- **Inspiration and brain science.** We've learned a lot about the brain in recent years, and have discovered that we are only consciously aware of a very small percentage of the inputs our brain receives from our senses, and that our brain is constantly processing these inputs, and bringing new ideas and conclusions to our consciousness. This is especially true when we're not keeping it busy with conscious thoughts, but are in a more relaxed state, and it has more "down time" to process. Many people receive their greatest inspiration in the shower for this reason, or during prayer and meditation. Yet we often say it was the Spirit that inspired us. How do we know that the Holy Ghost is behind these inspirational thoughts rather than it simply being how our brains work?

Assumptions

I've identified three assumptions that need to be made in order for the Holy Ghost to work as the LDS church teaches. First is the idea that when you feel good feelings, it is coming from a source outside of you. Second, that the "source outside of you" is the LDS Holy Ghost. Third, that the Holy Ghost is telling you that everything the LDS church teaches is true. When you feel a good feeling, does it really make sense to believe those things, when there are so many other explanations for the source and interpretation of the feelings that are just as plausible (or more so), and when there is no real proof that the feeling means what you thought? Taking into account the subjective nature of these feelings, the contradictions in what the Holy Ghost seems to be telling people, and how people of all faiths (and no faith) have these experiences and interpret them differently, I don't think it make sense to put absolute faith in the idea that these feelings are what the church says they are.

Obviously, because the method I had relied upon for understanding truth was now in question, the very foundation of my faith was shaken. I wasn't quite sure how this issue could be reconciled and how I could know truth. I could pray about it, and when I pray I feel good. But does that mean what I'm praying about is true? I seem to feel good regardless of what I'm praying about. I even feel good when I do things totally unrelated to religion. It became clear to me that I could no longer use these feelings as a measuring stick for truth.

It also seemed strange to me that a perfect God would expect us to base our testimonies on spiritual feelings, which are so subjective, so prone to misinterpretation, and so often contradictory. Why didn't he choose a more efficient method of discerning truth? Yes, he sent a prophet, but we're supposed to rely on the Spirit to know if he is a true prophet, and we're left again with the same paradox.

Fortunately, God also gave us our minds, to reason. And we're taught to use both in our quest for truth. (D&C 8:2) So I began using my mind more in this regard. I began to question everything, even down to the existence of God, and tried to make sense of the world from my own experience as well as that of others. As I studied church history, psychology, science, and spirituality, I made some very interesting discoveries, including additional contradictions in the church's doctrines which caused me more concern. I'll briefly go over the ones that bothered me most.

The Myth of Perfection

We are told that in order to enter heaven, we must be "perfect" (Mat 5:48, D&C 1:31), or at least as close to it as we can get in this life. However, the definition of perfection has changed throughout history. What was required of members of the church in Old Testament times is different from what was required in Jesus' day. And that is different from what was required in Joseph's Smith's day, which is different from what is required today. If you doubt this, just look at the temple recommend questions before the 1900's. Or read the Bible.

If God and Heaven are eternal and unchanging (Mormon 9:9), shouldn't the process to reach them remain the same? Yet, in our scriptures and history, there are many doctrines, commandments, and even saving ordinances that were taught, and then later abandoned. Some examples include animal sacrifice, circumcision, blood atonement, second anointing,

polygamy, and blacks not getting the priesthood. You could say that these changing commandments aren't eternal laws or principles that must be followed to get into heaven. Perhaps they are just requirements for obedience to God's earthly kingdom, which obedience, in whatever age, will somehow lead to salvation because God honors his earthly kingdom. But to me, this contradicts God's eternal nature. Perfection is perfection, and it is not of this world. Yet we are taught different requirements for perfection depending on the age we live in.

If a commandment isn't required for salvation, then why teach it as such, even if only for a short time? This makes it difficult to distinguish between commandments which are eternal and necessary for salvation, and those which are just the temporary "suggestions" of the day, like maybe the Word of Wisdom, which wasn't considered a "commandment" or even a requirement for Temple attendance until the 1930's.¹ When the scriptures say, "keep the commandments," which commandments are they referring to? The Ten commandments? If so, which set? Because there are several different sets in the scriptures.² Does it include obeying the word of wisdom, weekly church attendance, daily scripture study, and wearing Temple garments night and day? What about animal sacrifice and circumcision? Or does it just mean loving God and your neighbor? When Jesus said "keep my commandments," he couldn't have been referring to abstaining from alcohol (because he drank it) or to wearing Temple garments (because he didn't). So what does God really require of us to enter heaven? What are the essentials? And why does the church require obedience to all the extra stuff?

Perhaps the purpose of commandments isn't to prove ourselves worthy of salvation through our actions as much as it is to turn our hearts toward God through humility and submission. In this case, the commandments can change as people and cultures change, and it doesn't really matter so much which commandments we keep, so long as we love God. But if God cares about our hearts and isn't so concerned about the actions, then the church's emphasis on obedience and ordinances seems unnecessary. You could say God wants both, but the commandments don't lead everyone equally well to God-directed humility. It's a one-size-fits-all approach that doesn't always work. It's also false to assume that if someone loves God they will want to keep all the Mormon commandments.

Maybe it's impossible to define perfection in exact terms. We can't use Jesus as a practical example of perfection because we know so little about what he was really like. People are different, with their own needs and wants and abilities. Having imperfection keeps life exciting and unpredictable. Otherwise, we would all stagnate in boring sameness. I believe that the idea of universal achievable perfection is a myth, and an unhealthy one at that. Striving for perfection causes many people unnecessary guilt and unhappiness because they have not yet reached an undefinable and unattainable image of who they think they should be. If there is such a thing as perfection, perhaps we are already perfect and we just need to recognize it. Who knows?

Understanding the Origins of the Temple

¹ <http://mormonmatters.org/2009/02/16/temple-recommend-questions-by-guest-aaron-reeves/>

² <http://www.positiveatheism.org/crt/whichcom.htm>

One day, I decided to research what all the rumors were about concerning the link between Mormonism and Freemasonry. I simply went to the Wikipedia article about Freemasonry³ (which didn't mention anything about Mormonism), and there discovered many similarities to the LDS Temple ceremony, from the symbols used, like the square and compass, to the signs and tokens (handshakes) and verbiage used, to the clothing worn.

I already knew some similarities existed between the Masonic Temple and the LDS Temple, but I never knew they were so pronounced. This led me to search other sources, including LDS apologetic works (such as FAIR and FARMS), to discover how this is justified. I learned that **even LDS apologists admit that yes, the LDS Temple Ceremony was copied from Freemasonry soon after Joseph Smith became a Freemason**, and also that Freemasonry originated around Scotland in the 1700's, so does not come from Solomon's time as early church members supposed. But these apologists say that certain parts of the Temple ceremony (such as the covenants made) are still revealed and important, and that God can use whatever means he wants to teach his ordinances, including rituals from existing organizations.²

To me, that's a weak answer. Church leaders from Joseph Smith on have taught (and the temple ceremony itself implies) that the temple ordinances have been the same in the true church ever since Adam, and cannot be changed.³ But how can that be if the majority of the ceremony has recent origins, and if it continues to change in major ways, including even the ordinances and covenants themselves? For example, the grotesque body cutting penalties were changed in 1990 to the hand "signs" we use today, causing them to lose their original meaning.⁴ And if only parts of the Temple ceremony are essential to my salvation, and the rest are simply Masonic (or otherwise made-up) rituals, then why continue teaching the non-essential parts, especially when they're so strange? Yes, the church has removed many of them from the ceremony, but why were they even included to begin with if they were just a vehicle for the "true" ordinances? Why not just focus on the revealed essentials? **Moreover, we're taught that these masonic rituals and handshakes are required for us to pass by angels and get into heaven. But then how you do explain that the masons invented them just a few hundred years ago?** These signs were obviously not revealed from heaven by God, but were copied from a contemporary and largely secular fraternal organization. Also, doesn't the idea of passing by angels with handshakes contradict the scriptures which teach that we're judged by our actions and the intents of our hearts (Alma 12:14), not by what handshakes we remember?

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freemasonry>

² See http://www.fairlds.org/FAIR_Conferences/2005_Latter-day_Saints_and_Freemasonry.html and http://www.fairlds.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Can_Temple_Ceremonies_Change.pdf

³ Joseph Smith said, "Now the purpose in Himself in the winding up scene of the last dispensation is that all things pertaining to that dispensation should be conducted precisely in accordance with the preceding dispensations.... **He set the temple ordinances to be the same forever and ever** and set Adam to watch over them, to reveal them from heaven to man, or to send angels to reveal them." - [History of the Church, vol.4, p. 208](#) (emphasis added). For more quotes from prophets on this topic, see http://www.i4m.com/think/temples/temple_changes.htm.

⁴ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penalty_\(Mormonism\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penalty_(Mormonism)). For a complete list of changes to the ceremony in 1990, see http://www.i4m.com/think/temples/temple_ceremony.htm. For previous versions of the ceremony, see the links at the bottom of this page: <http://packham.n4m.org/temples.htm>.

What goes on in temples today is very different from what went on anciently. And we do know what went on in temples anciently -- the ritual killing of animals.

These questions totally shattered my faith in the Temple. As a youth, I loved the peaceful feeling I had doing baptisms for the dead. However, my first experience with the Temple endowment was not as pleasant. It was a strange and uncomfortable experience, as it is for many, and I remember feeling confused and overwhelmed. However, I quickly forgot that experience, and came to appreciate performing the rituals of the endowment ceremony, even though they still didn't make sense. I had heard and perceived possible meanings for the symbols and signs, but with all my years of temple going, they never revealed anything life changing, although I did enjoy the quiet, meditative atmosphere of the Temple. Now I understand that these symbols and rituals are man-made, copied from the Masonic order, and have nothing to do with salvation.

Polygamy / Polyandry

The church's own genealogical records on familysearch.org show that Joseph Smith was married to at least 24 women (other records show 33), the youngest of whom was only 14 years old.¹ I already knew that and was okay with it. What I didn't know was that at least 11 of those women were already married to other men!² (A fact that can also be verified on the same site.) There are accounts of Joseph sending men on missions, then marrying their wives while they were gone, threatening the woman that she will not be saved if she does not marry him. Some women refused and were ostracized. Many accounts also tell of Joseph's sexual encounters with these women, and **13 faithful LDS women testified in court that he had engaged sexually with them.**³ There is even some evidence to suggest that Joseph practiced abortions through "Dr." John C. Bennett,⁴ which idea is also supported by the fact that Brigham Young later married several of Joseph's wives and had children with them. Oliver Cowdery even called Joseph's "marriage" to his house maid, Fanny Alger, "a dirty, nasty, filthy affair."⁵

These are harsh accusations, but unfortunately, there is much evidence to support them, and virtually none to deny them. It's no wonder the church has avoided bringing up the polygamy issue at all in newer church manuals. I suppose this can all be justified if you believe God commanded it. In fact, pretty much anything can be justified in that case. But there are other facts that make it hard for me to believe that a loving and honest God would have condoned this. Joseph was very secretive about polygamy and lied about his extramarital activities to Emma and to the church as a whole, yet admitted it to others. The church condemned polygamy while Joseph practiced it. It was also against the law in the United States at the time. Brigham Young had sex with multiple wives, too, which is apparent in his 50+ children. Some of these wives were previously married to Joseph. Brigham was much more open about polygamy than Joseph. However, polygamy was still illegal, and practicing it violates the 12th article of Faith

¹ http://www.familysearch.org/Eng/Search/af/individual_record.asp?recid=7762167

² <http://www.wivesofjosephsmith.org/>

³ <http://mormonthink.com/joseph-smith-polygamy.htm>

⁴ <http://entreated.blogspot.com/2008/07/allegations-abt-joseph-smith.html>. See also <http://olivercowdery.com/smithhome/1886WWyl.htm#pg060a>

⁵ Letter written by Oliver Cowdery and recorded by his brother Warren Cowdery; see photograph in The Mormon Kingdom, vol. 1, page 27

(obeying the law). It also goes against several scriptures and past revelations Joseph himself had given which condemn plural marriage. Some of these have since been removed from the scriptures. (For example, see 1835 edition of D&C CI: 4, p.251, where monogamy is identified as the only acceptable form of marriage and where polygamy is called a “crime”). Sure, they’re prophets and they can do whatever they want. But in this case, they have committed adultery, lied, and broken the law; three things God has specifically commanded against elsewhere. Mormons don’t believe that prophets are infallible, but to me, this makes it hard to believe that they were honest and true prophets of God at all.

Smaller Things

By this point, my faith in Mormonism was severely shaken. I knew there were ways to explain around these issues. For example, maybe Joseph Smith got carried away with polygamy which is why God had to remove him, but God is still in charge of his church. And maybe the Temple is really just a way for God to test our obedience, rather than to give us keys to enter heaven. And maybe God doesn’t care what religion you belong to, what you believe, or what commandments you follow as long as you’re trying to be a good person. But these ideas are not what the church teaches, and no matter how I sliced it, it seemed impossible to completely resolve the issues. And doesn’t the fact that these issues exist at all seriously call into question the validity of the church’s claims?

As I started looking at the church and my beliefs with new eyes, I began to discover several other small items that caused me concern. I already knew about most of these issues, and they never really bothered me before. But now that I had taken away all preconceived notions about what was true and who to believe, I was able to analyze these issues again on their own merits. Unfortunately, I found balance weighing heavily against what the church claimed, and the real truth became more and more apparent. Here is a summary of the main issues I faced.

- If God wants all of us to return to him and follow him in this life, he’s done a very inefficient job of spreading his message. Only 0.2% of people alive today are members of the LDS church. That means 99.8% of the world’s population are not LDS. And that’s not including the billions more who have already lived and died. If God really wanted his children to hear his message, wouldn’t he have chosen a more efficient way to spread the word so they could decide if they wanted to follow?
- Over time, the church has significantly changed several passages in the Book of Mormon and other scriptures.¹ They have taken many controversial documents out of publication, rewritten the curriculum to remove stories and doctrines that would put the church in a negative light, and changed others to put themselves in a more positive light. Much of the condemning evidence against the church is found in their own out-of-print publications. Yes, the church has an ugly history, and of course they wouldn’t want to promote that part of it. But it seems deceptive to me that the church hides its true history and conjures up something far from the truth to present in Sunday School. If the church were really true, there wouldn’t be so much to hide.
- Receiving an LDS “blessing” heals you no better than those healed by “faith” in other religions. There are also times when you feel you will be healed, but you aren’t. Or a

¹ <http://www.irr.org/mit/changing-scripture.html>

blessing is promised which never comes to pass. If we really have the true Priesthood, it would be more effective than a placebo. Studies show that 85% of our physical problems heal on their own, without medical intervention.¹ Perhaps some of the “miracles” attributed to Priesthood blessings are simply our bodies healing themselves naturally.

- Joseph Smith claimed to translate the Book of Abraham from Egyptian papyri, which he purchased along with some mummies in Kirtland. But the same facsimiles found in the Pearl of Great Price (and their original copies, which do still exist) have since been translated by Egyptian scholars who unanimously agree that the papyri are common funerary texts having nothing to do with Abraham, and have been completely mistranslated by Joseph Smith.² For example, Facsimile #2 is a hypocephalus, an amulet placed around the neck of the deceased and is typical of many that exist in Egyptian museums around the world.
- Joseph Smith performed “money digging” for people in his early days, using a “seer” stone he found in a well. He would charge people money to lead them around the hills looking for treasure, yet never found any, which is one reason many people were upset with him, and why he spent so much time in court (i.e. because he deceived people). LDS historians agree that Joseph Smith used this same stone to “translate” the Book of Mormon while looking in a hat, even when the plates weren’t present.³
- Why were the lost 116 pages not re-translated? If Joseph’s enemies changed the words, it would be obvious to see that they had been changed, and Joseph could call them on their bluff, demonstrating that he translated it the same way both times. So it’s suspicious to me that the next section of the Book of Mormon contains basically the same story, but written differently, so Joseph didn’t have to reproduce the same words.
- The Book of Mormon contradicts itself, the Bible, and modern revelation, on numerous occasions. Much of its content appears to be copied from other books that Joseph Smith had in his possession, including (but not limited to) many verses from the King James Bible, some of which have since been shown to be incorrect translations.⁴ He also quotes numerous New Testament passages verbatim, including phrases that would that have been impossible for a pre-New Testament civilization to have written.⁵ I have personally traveled to many archaeological sites and museums in Central and South America, and have seen no conclusive evidence that the Book of Mormon civilizations existed. Actually, I have seen evidence against it, from the dates of cities being outside of Book of Mormon ranges (for example, Tikal in Guatemala was populated continuously from 1000 B.C. to 1000 A.D), to records and artifacts that have no correlation with the Book of Mormon. National Geographic, Smithsonian, and other reputable institutions have also declared that there is no archaeological evidence to support the Book of

¹ S. Vyse, *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 112. And Thomas E. Kida, *Don't Believe Everything You Think: The 6 Basic Mistakes We Make in Thinking*, Kindle Edition, p. 59.

² <http://mormonthink.com/book-of-abraham-issues.htm>. See also <http://www.amazon.com/His-Own-Hand-Upon-Papyrus/dp/0962096326>

³ http://en.fairmormon.org/Joseph_Smith_and_seer_stones#How_were_the_stone.28s.29_involved_in_the_translation_of_the_Book_of_Mormon.3F

⁴ For one example, see <http://ldsreasonandrevelation.blogspot.com/2011/08/building-upon-rock-making-sure-our.html>

⁵ <http://packham.n4m.org/linguist.htm>

Mormon in the New World.⁶ Much of the Book of Mormon content seems influenced by the religious debates going on in 19th century New York at the time it was written, and contains inaccurate descriptions of ancient meso-American life, describing many animals (such as horses, cattle, elephants, and more), resources (such as silk and steel), and technology (such as chariots and the cultivation of barley and wheat) that didn't exist until the Spanish arrived in the 1400's A.D.² There is also impossible population growth recorded in the Book of Mormon, and DNA evidence rejects the idea that these people are the "principle ancestors of the American Indians," as originally claimed by the church. We now know the American Indians came from Asia. The first manuscripts of the Book of Mormon were full of hundreds of consistent misspellings and grammatical errors which wouldn't have come about had Joseph translated the book word for word as is often claimed. Many passages have also been changed to reflect different doctrinal ideas, such as that Mary is the "mother of the Son of God" rather than the "mother of God." Even chiasmus don't prove that the book has Semitic origins. Chiasmus are found in all sorts of literary works, including Joseph's other writings, and come about by accident rather easily.³ When you look at all the evidence, it is likely that Joseph wrote the Book of Mormon without divine guidance, despite what we are told by some church leaders. Although other church leaders, such as B.H. Roberts, do admit that Joseph could have written it.⁴ Yes, the Book of Mormon still contains passages that are inspirational and has stories that link together in intricate ways, but so do many other books that don't claim to have historical origins. It is not a proof of its divinity nor historical accuracy.

- Not until 1837 did Joseph decide that God and Jesus were separate beings with physical bodies. Before that time, he preached that God was a spirit without a body, and Jesus was the physical embodiment of God.⁵ This teaching can even be found in the Book of Mormon,⁶ although many of the passages reflecting this doctrine have been changed. Why would Joseph have preached that God didn't have a body until 1837 if he had really seen God and Jesus both with physical bodies in 1820 like he later claimed?
- The stories of the first vision and restoration of the Priesthood evolved over time, as is evident in the various accounts Joseph and others gave of the stories. There was no mention of angelic visitations in either the first vision or in the Priesthood restoration until 22 years after they were said to have happened, despite Joseph's later claims to have been persecuted for seeing a vision. And when the stories did start being told, they continued to get more grandiose with each telling, including many contradicting statements. Joseph also continued to change his mind about whether it was Nephi or Moroni or Jesus or God who appeared to him first, and whether it was an actual vision, or just a dream.⁷ The dates of the first vision also contradicted each other and other events that were happening at the time (for example, the religious revival Joseph speaks of in his later account wasn't in 1820, but 1824). Even the date the Melchizedek

¹ <http://mormonthink.com/book-of-mormon-problems.htm#statements>

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archaeology_and_the_Book_of_Mormon

³ <http://mormonthink.com/book-of-mormon-problems.htm>

⁴ <http://mormonthink.com/josephweb.htm>

⁵ Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (2005), p. 420

⁶ [Mosiah 15:2-4](#)

⁷ <http://mormonthink.com/firstvisionweb.htm>

Priesthood was said to have been restored remains unknown. Why wasn't this important date recorded? It's likely that it never happened, and the story of Peter, James, and John visiting Joseph and Oliver was later made up to help increase the church's credibility during a difficult time.¹

- The church does not disclose how they use their tithing funds and donations, except in countries where they are required to by law. However, it is estimated that the church has a net worth of over \$100 billion. Interestingly, they've spent only \$750 million on humanitarian aid over the past 22 years (¼ of what they spent to build the new mall in Salt Lake City), and less than 1% of their income overall. The rest is used for administrative expenses and building the church. This is even less than non-religious corporations such as Walmart, which donates 1.5% to charity. Compare this to most good non-profit charitable organizations which spend 95-100% of their donations on helping the poor, and use only 1-5% percentage on administrative expenses. The church also owns numerous cattle ranches in the U.S., including more land in Florida than Disney, used primarily to raise cattle for beef.² (So much for eating "very little meat.") It seems more like a for-profit business than a non-profit church.
- The Bible contains awful descriptions of a jealous God commanding his followers to kill entire groups of people (including women and children) in order to obtain land, or for worshipping another god. Rape of young women is also condoned numerous times, and even commanded by prophets (including Moses).³ In the last days, we're told that God plans to destroy the wicked, killing the vast majority (99.8%?) of his children. Is this really what God is like?
- Modern prophets contradict the scriptures (and each other) on numerous occasions, and we're told that modern revelation trumps old revelation. Yet, in the Temple, we make covenants to follow the scriptures (not the living prophets nor personal revelation). So when there are contradictions, which do we follow? Still, many church leaders have taught us to confirm by personal revelation the things that the prophets teach. But if we can have our own link to God, then what's the point of having a prophet at all?
- For a short time, during the tenure of Brigham Young, the church taught doctrines such as that a man is justified in killing his wife if she commits adultery, and that her sin is unforgivable unless she consents to being killed. What's worse, this doctrine was actually practiced. Black men were killed by church leaders if caught sleeping with a white woman, along with their children. These are horrible, gory, and racist doctrines, but they are a true part of LDS history, put in place by a "prophet of God."⁴
- The church uses (whether knowingly or unknowingly, I can't say) unethical psychological techniques to keep people in the church; from encouraging children and adults to tell others they know the church is true even when they don't really know, to committing to give their lives and money to the church and follow the prophet no matter what he tells them to do, to inducing shame and guilt and peer pressure to stay in the church and not

¹ <http://mormonthink.com/priesthood.htm>

² <http://mormonthink.com/tithing.htm>

³ For a list of many of these scriptures, see <http://www.evilbible.com/Rape.htm> and <http://www.evilbible.com/Murder.htm>

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blood_atonement. For references to where this doctrine was taught in LDS history, see <http://tinyurl.com/6q74guy>. For apologists answers to this, see: http://en.fairmormon.org/Mormonism_and_doctrine/Repudiated_concepts/Blood_atonement

look outside it or associate with those who may take you away from it, and many more. Excuse the strong word, but these techniques and others the church uses, fit exactly with the definition of a “cult.”¹

- Many stories in scripture are impossible, and conflict with much scientific evidence.² For example: Noah’s Ark, the Tower of Babel, three days of darkness, the Jaredite migration, the age of the earth, and many more. However, the LDS church implies that these stories are historical accounts and should be taken literally.
- The idea of eternal families doesn’t make sense. Why is it necessary to have everyone linked together in some kind of family chain? In order to qualify for the highest level of the celestial kingdom, everyone in the family must be perfect, or the family won’t be together, causing more sadness. If you really love each other, being apart wouldn’t be heaven. This causes many people to divorce if they think their spouse isn’t perfect enough in this life, which actually destroys a family. In the end, a “family” just ends up being a husband and wife (or wives) anyway because children grow up and have their own families, and their children have their own, etc. It doesn’t make sense that families live together forever.
- In the church, we’re taught to use Joseph Smith’s devotion to the church as evidence for its truthfulness. Joseph endured persecution, imprisonment, and even gave up his life for the church. Why would he have done that if it weren’t true? Here are some likely explanations. First, consider that if Joseph had convinced thousands that he was a prophet of God through lies, and then he was to back down from that claim and admit himself a fraud and a deceiver, he would have faced ridicule and rejection not only by his critics, but also by those who used to be his followers and friends. Maybe Joseph saw this as a fate worse than death. Better to suffer a little and even go down a martyr than to be seen as a deceiver (although Joseph did use a pistol to try and defend himself on that last day in the Carthage jail as well, so the “willing martyr” label is debatable). Also remember that when presented with the fabricated Kinderhook Plates,³ he couldn’t admit to not knowing what they were because he was supposed to be a prophet that could read ancient writing. So he made something up and pretended to translate it. And he was very good at it. But they were fake plates. Other explanations to why he would be so devoted to the church are that he wanted power, money, sex, and prestige, all of which he did have in abundance. Or that he had schizophrenia or another kind of mental disorder which caused him to see and hear things that weren’t there and believe them without any doubt. Unfortunately, we can’t get inside of his mind today, so I suppose we will never know for sure. But we can look at the evidence and draw some likely conclusions from there. Because of the many contradictions, it is impossible that he was telling the truth at all times.

Dealing With the Evidence

At first, it was difficult for me to accept that these things were true. I really wanted the church to be true. It felt good, I had positive experiences in it, and was comfortable with it. But even more,

¹ <http://www.prem-rawat-talk.org/forum/uploads/CultCharacteristics.htm>

² <http://mormonthink.com/scienceweb.htm>

³ <http://mormonthink.com/kinderhookweb.htm>

the church was my life, my filter through which I viewed the world, my hope for the future; it was everything to me!

When your entire life is built around the church, and your identity is tied so tightly with it, the thought that it might not be true is a very scary thought indeed! I had to overcome mountains of fear before even being willing to consider that the church might not be true. What if the church *does* end up being true? Will God punish me for reading things that contradict what the prophets say? Am I throwing away my eternal life? If I leave the church, will my values deteriorate to the point of becoming a drug addict or sex criminal? What will become of my family? What will my family and friends back in Utah think of me if I leave the church?

I first tried to rationalize away the problems I'd encountered, but my desire to know the truth and follow it was too strong. And unfortunately, none of the answers I could find addressed the problems satisfactorily. Most of the explanations I found by apologists only made weak connections to possibilities, or offered different ways of looking at LDS doctrine that made the problem less of an issue but at the same time brought up additional questions. Overall, I found very little concrete evidence that resolved the issues themselves. In the end, it usually just turned back to "have faith and everything will be explained later." If there were just one or two issues, I could probably overlook them. And if it were simply a lack of evidence for the church, I could have faith that one day some would be provided. Unfortunately, the problem wasn't a lack of positive evidence for the church, but an abundance of evidence against the church, showing that it's not what it claims to be -- and most of it is from the church's own publications! I wish the contradictions and historical problems I've written about weren't true. But they are, and it's not easy to accept that, nor its implication.

Years before, I had heard many of the same problems with the church, and apologetic arguments explaining them. And of course, I always sided with the apologists and had my spiritual experiences to make up for any logical gaps. But now that I realize my spiritual experiences don't necessarily prove anything, I can easily see the fallacy in these arguments, and it's embarrassing to me now that I didn't see through them before. I believe a major factor that helped me see clearly is that I have now made the decision to **follow truth wherever I find it, even if goes against what the church teaches.** (Removing the proverbial glasses.) Whereas before I was convinced that the church was true, and like many apologists, was trying to make the evidence fit within that belief system rather than looking at the evidence with a clear head and drawing likely conclusions from there. It wasn't an honest search for truth because I thought I already had the truth. My current approach feels more honest to me, and I believe it's more likely to lead to real truth.

Choosing Faith Over Evidence

Perhaps I could choose to have "faith" and believe, despite the evidence. I understand the benefit of faith in things that have little or no evidence for or against them, but it doesn't make sense to me that God would want his children to believe something in the face of indisputable contradictory evidence. For example, I have faith in the goodness of humanity, in the power of science, and in my ability to accomplish what I set my mind out to do. Maybe those beliefs are unwarranted, as there are plenty of examples of mean people, errors in science, and my own

failures. But I think there is more evidence supporting those beliefs and I choose to believe them because they enrich my life. But I don't believe that $2+2=6$, that pots of gold lie at the end of rainbows, or that Joseph Smith knew how to translate Egyptian. There is just too much evidence to the contrary.

When you believe and follow someone in the face of contradictory evidence, that is blind obedience, and if taken to the extreme and followed exactly, it would only lead us to be mindless slaves who don't know how to think for ourselves, but just do what we're told without questioning. This doesn't sound to me like something a loving father who cares about the growth and intelligence of his children would want, because little intelligence is being used. I should clarify that I do think it's important to have hope and optimism. We probably wouldn't have the light bulb if it weren't for Edison's "faith" that he could make it work, despite so many failed attempts. This kind of faith is what drives us to survive and transcend life's problems. But following someone unwaveringly and without questioning when a significant amount of evidence shows you that it may not be a wise choice, is not a good idea, and can even be dangerous.

Eventually, I reached a point where I could simply no longer deny the logical contradictions and damning evidence I had discovered. Just because the church "felt" good didn't make it true. It just meant that I was used to it and enjoyed the comforting doctrines and rituals. The actual evidence, when weighed objectively, showed the church to be false, and not what it claims to be.

Once I finally accepted the idea that the church was simply Joseph Smith's creation, and not inspired by God, everything made sense! The difficult questions immediately disappeared, and all the pieces fit together perfectly. I no longer had to rationalize or do mental gymnastics to try to explain certain doctrines or practices, and I never realized how much I was doing that before. It was now plain to see how the church came about and why, and what caused certain doctrines to exist and to change. My LDS filters were gone, the picture was very clear, and in many ways I felt relieved. Are you able to remove your glasses and see it from this perspective?

Still, we continued going to church for several months. I enjoyed many aspects of it and our friends were there. But we felt increasingly uncomfortable serving in our callings and teaching things we no longer believed were true. My obligatory testimonies over the pulpit became thank-a-monies, and Jen had to cut out large sections of her primary lessons to feel comfortable with what she was teaching to the children. We decided that in March of 2011 when we moved to a different part of Costa Rica, we'd stop attending church. We didn't tell people in the branch we moved from because we didn't want to hurt their testimonies or ruin relationships. But we knew we no longer wanted to participate in church meetings. We didn't ask to have our names removed from the church because of the hassle involved, but we may take care of that paperwork one day.

After I made all of these discoveries and my perspective changed, I was relieved in some ways, but I still felt lost and confused in other ways because my whole perspective on life and my purpose had changed, and I didn't know who I was, why I was here, or how to view the world. I also felt stupid that I had lived my whole life ignoring so many issues that were right in front of my face, and that I had wasted so many years of my life serving a lie. Then again, when I was in

the church, I only saw the good in my experiences, and my LDS past is still a part of me that helped make me who I am, so I was not resentful for long. I was also grateful that others in my family, including my mom, had already left the church before me. Their love and understanding helped me through these huge changes. But I worried about being rejected by other family and friends if they found out about my change in beliefs, and I didn't want to lose their respect and trust. I also feared not being understood. So I didn't announce my discoveries publicly at first, and focused more on trying to determine what it is that I really believe.

Part II: Changes in Beliefs and Lifestyle

Finally realizing that Mormonism is a man-made religion has freed me to reassess my beliefs and abandon those which no longer serve me. I have started with a fresh slate, looked at my own life experience, and am creating a belief system that works for me and allows me greater freedom and happiness.

In many ways, I feel like breaking out of Mormonism is like being born again, hatching out of an egg and emerging as a new and better "me." While inside the shell, I was oblivious to being inside an egg, and was happy there. But now I see so much more, and my joy is even more full. I understand what it's like inside the egg, but now I know what's outside, too. And it's a beautiful new world.

Beliefs I've Kept

While I struggled to rebuild my new belief system, I found that there were still a number of beliefs in Mormonism that made sense to me and that I held onto. Some of these are not necessarily practiced well by the majority of church members, but in some interpretations, they are part of the doctrines. Here are a few of them:

- That people are inherently good and shouldn't be punished for the mistakes of others. (Article of Faith 2)
- That following your heart or intuition, when coupled with intelligent decision making based on good research, often leads you down fulfilling paths. (D&C 9:8)
- That babies are innocent. (Moroni 8:15)
- That people should be able to believe whatever they choose and that people with differing beliefs can still be friends. (Article of Faith 11)
- That being honest and kind and living with integrity are good principles to follow if you want to have a happy life. (Article of Faith 13)

Next I will identify some beliefs I have abandoned along with religion, new ideas and paradigms I'm learning about, things that I miss in the church I left behind, and the benefits that have come to me as a result of leaving the church. These lists aren't comprehensive, but should give you an idea of where I'm at.

Beliefs I have abandoned

- That God exists in the form of a man in a physical body and lives in outer space near a star called Kolob. If God created the universe, then he/she/it existed before the universe, and most likely lives outside of and independent of it, unless God simply is the Universe, whatever that means.
- That God speaks to one person in order to control another person or group of people. If God is powerful enough to communicate with us all individually and simultaneously, then there is no need for an earthly leader.
- That you must receive ordinances from a specific church, believe in certain doctrines, or follow specific practices in order to be “saved” and enter Heaven.
- That a man and a woman offended God by listening to a talking snake and eating a magic fruit that made them smart and caused the whole earth and all its future inhabitants to fall into a lesser state that could only be restored to a perfect state by having God’s son suffer and die, and then come back from the dead. Each culture has its own creation myth, and this is but one.¹ Just because it’s the one I was taught doesn’t make it true.
- That we are here because God decided we needed to grow, get a body, and be tested to see if we are worthy of living with him for eternity (even though according to LDS doctrine, we were already living with him before we came down here, regardless of our worthiness).
- That Satan exists and seeks to tempt and destroy us and keep us from eternal happiness. There are much more reasonable explanations for our negative thoughts than an invisible devil.
- That special underwear made of cotton and polyester protects us from danger (some will say this is more of a cultural myth than official doctrine, although the wording in the temple leaves it open as to whether it’s physical or only spiritual protection that garments offer).
- That after we die, we will be judged for all our actions and thoughts and placed in a kingdom from which we can no longer progress (unless we have already been as perfect as we can be).
- That Jesus Christ suffered and died so that every person on earth (or some say, in the universe) can be forgiven of their sins. If there is such a thing as sin, and if God is actually offended by it, then he can forgive us whenever he wants, just as we can forgive those who offend us, without having to make someone else suffer for it. It’s like if your best friend offended you, but you’re not willing to forgive him until you make your son suffer for what your friend did. It doesn’t make sense that there would need to be a savior. Of course, for an LDS person to see this, they must also remove the unwarranted belief that “suffering” is required to fulfill some kind of divine law whenever an offense occurs. I believe that true forgiveness is unconditional, and does not require anyone to suffer (including Jesus) in order to offer it. Otherwise, it’s not really forgiveness, because you’re demanding something in return, and in this case a very cruel demand.
- That Jesus was divine, born of a virgin, performed miracles, and was resurrected. It took me a lot more time studying about the historicity of Jesus before I came to this conclusion. It was hard to accept because I had always seen him as my savior and was conditioned to be fearful of offending him. One major factor that led me to this was the

¹ <http://www.magictails.com/creationlinks.html>

evidence that shows that the New Testament stories of Jesus were not written down until decades after they happened, after being passed down orally for many generations and changed or invented by those who told them, often to fit the ancient prophecies of a messiah. The four gospels don't appear to be written by Jesus' original disciples -- they weren't even written by eye witnesses!¹ These books conflict with each other, as well as with other contemporary accounts, even on important matters like the virgin birth and resurrection (the gospels of Mark and John leave out the story of Jesus' birth completely, and Matthew and Luke don't agree on many of its details, such as where Jesus was born, Joseph's lineage, and much more).² Also, many of the elements of Jesus' story and miracles, from his birth to resurrection, have parallels in the mythical figures of other cultures, and some arguments can be made that many of these elements were adapted to Jesus' story.³ After Jesus died, there were numerous other books and "gospels" written about him, but most of them were intentionally destroyed after the council of Nicea to better promote the doctrines that the council agreed upon. Fortunately, some copies have been found, and much Biblical scholarship is available to help us learn more about the historical Jesus and which teachings in the Bible may have actually been written by him vs. added by others. Unfortunately, the truth appears to be far different from the story that Christianity tells about him today.⁴ For a summary of the reliability of the New Testament for teachings about Jesus, this short article by Robert Bushman explains my beliefs on the subject very clearly: <http://www.robertbushman.info/NT.pdf>.

Beliefs I am still open to, but am unsure about

Below are some beliefs I haven't let go of, but don't really hold onto either. These ideas may be true or false, and I am fine either way. Unfortunately, I haven't found any way to know, at this point, the truthfulness or falseness of any of these statements for certain.

- That God exists. (Although I have no idea in what form, if any)
- That we are more than our bodies, or have some kind of spiritual essence. (And how is that different from consciousness?)
- That the universe was created, rather than happened by chance. (I should say that regardless of how the universe began, it seems evident that afterward, life developed on earth through the process of natural selection proposed by Darwin).
- That our life continues on after we die, in some form or another. (Besides our bodies decomposing into dust and growing into a plant or some other organism)

At first, this uncertainty was unsettling. I wanted answers! And I still do. But now I realize that not having the answers is okay, too, and it can actually make life exciting and can increase the wonder and mystery of our existence even more. Still, I'm passionate about learning all I can

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historicity_of_Jesus#Gospels

² <http://atheism.about.com/od/biblegospels/p/GospelsNativity.htm>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_Christ_and_comparative_mythology

⁴ Two books I enjoyed that opened my eyes to who Jesus really may have been and what he meant by his teachings are [Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time](#) by Marcus J Borg, a retired Lutheran minister and Biblical scholar; and Deepak Chopra's [The Third Jesus: The Christ We Cannot Ignore](#)

about our existence here and trying to uncover the mystery of it all. This has led me to explore other belief systems and ideas that I wouldn't have even considered with my Mormon glasses.

When I first wiped my slate clean of beliefs, I strongly considered the Atheistic perspective, or the idea that there was no creator, and there is no purpose to life other than the one we give it. And that nothing (which is an unstable state) spawned space and time, and over billions of years evolved into what we have today. If there is a creator, then he had to come from somewhere, and eventually it must all be traced back to "nothing" anyway. It makes logical sense.¹

I actually found this view empowering on a number of levels. First, realizing that I couldn't depend on a god to answer my prayers or make circumstances work in my favor helped me to see that I was the only one responsible for my choices and for making my life what it could be. Second, the idea that there is no afterlife helped me appreciate the unique and precious opportunity of this life even more. Third, that I didn't have to believe anything that didn't have evidence to back it up, and that eventually, as we learn more, any false beliefs we do have will be disproved and let go of.

However, science does have some limitations. While we have a great understanding of the physical laws of the universe, we don't understand how those laws of physics came to be, or why they exist at all. Perhaps even Atheists can believe in Einstein's god, a kind of natural life force or evolutionary impulse that fills life with harmony and order, yet is not concerned with the individual lives of humankind. But again, we don't know the origin or cause of that force.

I've also studied many New Age philosophies, some of which are actually old age philosophies resurfacing, coupled with the new scientific knowledge. This includes ideas such as that this life is just an illusion or a dream and is only happening in the mind. The nature of quantum particles seems support this theory. This idea, along with other scientific studies, also leaves a bit of room for ideas such as that we create our realities to some degree through intention or thought, that our minds are all connected, and that telepathy, intuition, and telekinesis are possible. For example, many studies have been performed and verified showing that through thoughts only, humans can influence random number generators on computers so they generate more 0's than 1's or vice versa. However, the amount of influence is just barely over chance, yet consistent and statistically significant. This demonstrates that these effects of intention and observation may be most visible on small scales such as changes within our own brains.²

In the near future, I plan to study more about reincarnation, mediumship, out of body experiences, and the existence of spirits and guides. I have doubts as to whether any of these phenomena are real, but I'd like to give them a fair chance, and evaluate what evidence has been produced so far. For example, I've heard there are many cases of children reporting

¹ Richard Dawkins makes this point well in his book "[The God Delusion](#)"

² For details of this and other studies on extrasensory experiences, read [Entangled Minds](#) by Dean Radin. Other interesting books on these topics include [War of the Worldviews](#), [Science and the Near Death Experience](#), and [The Disappearance of the Universe](#). (That last one's a little "out there," but fascinating).

memories of having been another person who recently died, and they are able to share verifiable details about that person that they could not have known.

Again, there may be nothing to these theories, and they might be easily explained away by other means. But I'm not afraid to check it out, and I will of course withhold my judgment until I have a good reason to believe something. Whether or not these ideas are true, it's still interesting to me to learn about what other people believe and why.

Things I miss in the church

When we first stopped attending church, there were a few things that I missed from my participation there. Here are some of them:

- Having an easy way to make friends with similar beliefs anywhere I go
- A weekly chance to publicly use my musical talents
- Built-in opportunities to serve and help others in different ways
- Having a "sure knowledge" of how I came to earth, why I'm here, and where I'm going after I die
- Daily and weekly rituals to help me feel warm and fuzzy
- Language practice, when attending church in a foreign country

While there are things that I miss about the church, I've found other sources for each of them that allow greater freedom and enjoyment, and still stretch and fulfill me. I've learned how to make friends outside of a church context, and they're some of the best friends I've ever had! I still enjoy writing and performing music. I've found ways to serve and volunteer in and out of my community. I enjoy studying and learning about science, psychology, spirituality, and the nature of reality. I meditate regularly and feel great doing so. And there are lots of people willing to speak to me in a foreign language when I want practice.¹ So, I'm not missing my experience in church much anymore.

Benefits that have come to me through leaving the church

The benefits that have come to me through leaving the church were surprisingly significant, and I didn't expect that changing my mindset would alter me and my life in so many positive ways. Here are a few:

- I don't judge people as much. I can look at somebody and be their friend without having to worry about their salvation, or somehow steering the conversation toward the church to help them find the "right" path ("every member a missionary"). Consequently, my relationships are now more genuine, and I am filled with more love for people, regardless of their religion, sexual orientation, or race. It's also easier to make new friends.
- I don't feel guilty or judged by God for every mistake I make. Now that I have abandoned the idea of "sin" and a judgmental god, I am filled with more love for myself and others. I

¹ Check out livemocha.com to meet people worldwide and practice languages with them online. Don't worry, no coffee is involved.

no longer condemn others or feel condemned for many acts I used to see as wrong. It's easier to focus on living my life for the highest good of all, rather than worrying about little sins and practices that don't seem to hurt anyone anyway. It's also easier to forgive others when they do something that offends me. This doesn't mean I have no moral compass. Quite the opposite. I don't believe harming others leads to happiness, and many actions have negative consequences that are important to consider. But if I or someone else goes shopping on Sunday or drinks a glass of wine, I don't believe there is anything morally wrong with it, and feel no guilt or worry over things like that.

- I have more free time. No more church on Sunday, meetings and activities throughout the week, conferences, Temple attendance, callings, family home evening, home/visiting teaching, ward building cleanup, genealogy, service, scripture study, and all the other responsibilities we feel we need to do as members of the church. I still like to read uplifting books, and we spend even more time together as a family. I also enjoy helping others where I can. But I no longer feel bound to do all these things, and I feel no guilt for not doing them according to a prescribed schedule. My life is much less stressful now.
- An open world for me and my children. I no longer think I know the answers to all of life's important questions, and how everyone should be. Anything is possible in this world, and there is so much to learn. We don't know what's going to happen when we die, and that's exciting. We don't have to follow the path of school, mission, marriage, and kids. Other paths are equally as valid and can be even more joyful and fulfilling.
- Things make sense again. I am finally able to see myself and the world more clearly. From dinosaurs and evolution, to aliens and ghosts, I am now able to make decisions based on my experience and what makes sense to me, rather than filtering out ideas that didn't mesh with what I thought the prophets had taught. I don't fear new ideas or worry about protecting my faith. I'm more open-minded, willing to fully step into differing perspectives, and am learning more because of it. At the same time, I'm also more skeptical about new and sensational ideas that don't make sense or don't have good evidence to back up their claims. This feels much healthier to me.
- I can wear whatever I want. Because I no longer have to wear temple garments, I have a lot more choices of comfortable underwear and am not restricted in other clothing I want to wear. When weather is warm, I appreciate not having to wear two shirts. I can also pack lighter when traveling. My wife has enjoyed the new spectrum of clothing styles available to her, and I have to say that she looks way better in her new underwear.
- More money. I now have 10% of my income back to do whatever I want with. I still try to give a percentage of my income to charitable causes, but now I have more control in that regard and can put my money toward specific causes that I am passionate about without wondering where my "charitable contributions" are going. I am now more confident that my money actually helps people who are truly in need.
- There is so much joy outside of the church that I had ignored. I can use my talents and abilities to serve others in ways that are most fulfilling to me, rather than simply looking forward to another church mission. I can make new friends who contribute to my life with their own unique experiences. And I can appreciate my own growth and achievements, as well as that of others, whether or not that growth has anything to do with the church.
- Appreciation for this life. We don't know what will happen when we die, so this life may be all we have. That gives me more incentive to make the most of every moment I have,

to take care of the earth, and do all I can to make the world a better place for my children and grandchildren. I no longer think thoughts like, “It doesn’t matter. The world will be destroyed in a few years anyway when Christ comes back.”

Ex-Mormons Aren’t “Bad”

When people leave the church, I think there’s a tendency for members to try to explain why in a way that makes them feel immune to “falling away” themselves; for example, the thought that people leave the church because they want to do something the church is restricting (i.e. sin). People leave the church for a number of reasons, but a desire to sin is usually not one of them¹ and had nothing to do with my reasons for leaving. Sure, there are benefits I’ve gained from leaving the church, but most of these I didn’t realize until after I came to conclusion that the church wasn’t true. For example, once I discovered the church wasn’t true, I realized, “Oh wow. That means I can drink alcohol!” So I tried a few different drinks, and discovered that I didn’t like the taste or how they burned my throat. So I still don’t drink. Actually, I probably keep the Word of Wisdom better than most Mormons with how I avoid meat and soda pop. :) Anyway, the point is that **“sinning” was an afterthought of leaving the church, not a reason for it. For me, leaving was all about interpreting the Spirit and trying to make sense of all the contradictions I’d noticed.**

Most people who leave the church don’t do it because they want to be “bad.” They actually believe they’re doing what’s right and it’s a matter of integrity. Leaving the church is scary if your current life revolves around the church, and it takes guts to do so. But it doesn’t turn you into a bad person. Remember that ethical principles and social norms exist regardless of religion. Overall, kindness, love, generosity, and friendship prevail, and the majority of people across all cultures and religions choose to live by these principles, and even those who don’t believe in God can have kind and loving families (I know several personally). I am the same good, loving person I always was, and hopefully even more so than before. What causes people to be bad is a whole other discussion, but I have met so many good, non-religious people now, that I believe religion is not the answer to a healthy society.

In fact, many wars and mass murders in our earth’s history were and are performed because of religion, which so often forces beliefs onto others and then teaches people that they are “better” than others. Even if this idea isn’t taught directly (which it often isn’t), it’s implied in the statement that you belong to the only true church, and even more so that you were so valiant in the pre-existence that you were blessed to be born into a white Mormon family in America (the promised land) in the Latter-Days! What greater blessing is there? Talk about an ego trip! I know it stroked mine.

When people believe in a religion, and are willing to follow God to the point of killing someone (Abraham & Isaac, Nephi & Laban, and numerous historical and scriptural stories of mass murder), that is a dangerous belief system not much different from the one that drives terrorists. In many ways, authoritarian religions give us an unhealthy way to view the world, despite the

¹ Survey results for why people leave the church: http://whymormonsleave.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Mormon_Stories_FC.pdf

good they may do, and the many good people inside them.² Religions are also the source of much good in the world, but they are not the only source of good, and they are often the source of much bad, all of which has to be weighed in consideration when choosing to participate. The fact that Utah leads the nation in depression² and pornography³ subscriptions says something, too.

I recently found a wonderful series of video interviews with people who have left the church and found greater peace in their lives because of it. It's easy to see that these are not people who want to be bad, but are good, honest people of integrity. You can watch the videos at <http://www.iamanexmormon.com>.

What Now?

My beliefs continue to evolve each day. As I learn of new ideas, gain new experiences, and hear of new evidence, my beliefs change along with me. I think this is natural and the only way a belief can really be mine - I must learn from my own experience. I no longer say that I "know" something is true, but evidence shows when an idea is more likely to be true than another. And there are even some beliefs I may choose to lean toward despite not having evidence, simply because I want them to be true, but I don't hold onto these beliefs too tightly. After reading this document, you probably have a good idea of my current beliefs, although they may change tomorrow. I'm even still open to Mormonism being true if these issues can be reconciled.

What If I'm Wrong?

Yes, what if I'm wrong about all this? What if the church really is true, and I'm throwing away my eternal salvation by writing this letter? If I'm wrong, and God is truly merciful and just, then I believe He will understand and forgive me. Why? Because I have used all the mental and spiritual capacities he has given me to make the best decision I can with the evidence he has provided me up to this point, including church historical records and scripture, my own reasoning ability, and the influence of spiritual promptings and intuition I have received after much seeking. If I end up being wrong, how could God possibly condemn me for doing my best to follow what I determined to be true using all the tools he gave me? A just and loving God would not do that.

Many people choose to stay in a religion only out of fear that it might actually be true, and are worried about being on the wrong side at Judgment day.⁴ But an omniscient God would see through those reasons, and according to scripture, wouldn't reward that kind of half-hearted faith anyway.⁵ If reason tells you the church isn't true, then staying in it out of fear is not going to get you a reward in Heaven. An honest God would reward integrity to truth over faithfulness to falsehood.

¹ Mark Robert Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain*, pp. 10-11

² <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/695231614/Utah-leads-the-nation-in-rates-of-depression.html>

³ <http://people.hbs.edu/bedelman/papers/redlightstates.pdf>

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pascal's_Wager

⁵ See [1 Chronicles 28:9](#) and [Alma 12:14](#).

Leaving the Church

Millions of people have left the church over the years, and everyone has their different reasons. Now that so much information that was previously hidden is available for free online, more members are leaving each day. Inactivity rates are extremely high all over the world. Only about 40% of members in the U.S. actually attend sacrament meeting regularly, and studies show that only 50% of U.S. converts and 25% of foreign converts remain active after one year.¹ Consequently, there are more former Mormons than active Mormons.² Perhaps out of the 13 million members on the church records, only 4 or 5 million are active church goers.

Of course, the number of active members doesn't indicate that a church is true. Otherwise, we all better become Muslims.³ But I have seen the church do a lot of good for people, helping them get off drugs or get through a hard time. The church can provide a great support network, and it does encourage service and thrift and other principles that make for a good society. It doesn't emphasize its shady past, and mainly focuses on positive things today. The church did a lot of good for me as I was growing up, too, giving me opportunities for leadership and friendship and structure, reasons to "be good," the chance to be a part of something "bigger," and many wonderful feelings and experiences. Of course, I was blind to the negative effects I was receiving at the same time, such as judging others, unnecessary guilt, and the other psychological mind control tactics mentioned earlier. Some people may really need the church, and others just really like it (I sure did). I encourage anyone to stay who is happy there, and can maintain an open and non-judgmental mind.

If you're LDS and are troubled by anything you've read in this document, but you still want to stay in the church, you may find a welcoming community at staylds.com. Their essay on "[How to Stay in the Church After a Major Challenge of Your Faith](#)"⁴ almost convinced me to stay. On the other hand, if you've decided that the church isn't what it claims to be, and you no longer want to be a part of it, but aren't sure how to leave, you may enjoy reading from thousands of others who have gone through the same thing at postmormon.org, lifeaftermormonism.net, or other sites for recovering Mormons.

Many people who are aware of the issues I have mentioned in this letter choose to overlook (or deny) them, and focus on the good they enjoy in the church. They see the issues as irrelevant because they don't interfere with the benefits they are receiving from the church, or the spiritual transformations they've experienced within the context of church. Or they hold liberal beliefs about church doctrine that are on the fringe or even in contradiction to what most church leaders teach publicly, but that still qualify them for active membership. Others acknowledge the issues and remain in the church in the hope these problems will be proved wrong someday (i.e. maybe God changed the Indian's DNA to Asian, the Masons really did have the original Temple ceremony, and Egyptologists don't really understand Egyptian correctly). Some accept the errors in the church and don't believe fully in all the doctrines, yet stay "active" for social or family reasons, for tradition, or for fear of being ostracized if they leave. Others simply may not

¹ http://www.mormonwiki.org/Population_and_growth_rate

² <http://tinyurl.com/88xvqzv>

³ http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2011-02-23-catholic_vatican_22_ST_N.htm

⁴ <http://staylds.com/docs/HowToStay.html>

have found anything better, and it's more comfortable for them to stay where they're at than shake their life up with something new. We all must choose what works for us, and I respect those who stay for any of the reasons above.

But these reasons were not strong enough to keep me in the church. Either the church is all it claims to be, or it's not. And if it's not, I am not going to disregard my integrity to feign belief in a deception, and certainly won't commit my life to it. I considered staying in the church for the good feelings, sense of community, and possible spiritual growth, even though I believed the church wasn't true, but I realized that the benefits I enjoy in the church can be attained through other places, belief systems, and organizations across the globe, without the negative side effects.

Many stay in the church because they think it helps them become a better person and makes them happy. But I realized that my happiness and good deeds don't come from a church. They come from within me, and I can choose to be happy and do good in a variety of circumstances, and am in fact even more free to do so outside of the confines of authoritarian religion. I never used to believe that. I thought everyone would be happier with the church, and I felt bad for those outside of it. But now I see that there are incredibly happy and good people outside of the church, and that some people in and out of the church are actually very hurt by the church's doctrines (many gays, for example). Still, sometimes people really are happier believing in a lie than in the truth, and since we all probably hold false beliefs about ourselves or others to some degree, believing in a false religion can be justified on those grounds. If you ask a Mormon the question, "If the church really weren't true, would you want to know it?" some of them will answer "no." They'd rather believe a false religion than face the pain of it not being true. But I am not one of those people. I would rather know the truth, because as Jesus taught, "the truth shall set you free."¹ And I have never been more free in my life.

In many ways, the church will always feel like "home" to me because it's what I was raised in, and it was big part of my life for so many years. But at this point in my life, I've chosen to place a higher value on truth and learning than on feeling at home in the nest. Through all my travels, I've learned to feel very at "home" with change and new places and experiences. I had already left my home in Utah, so I didn't have strong community ties holding me to the church, which has made my transition out of it much easier. I was also very fortunate to have my wife come to the same conclusions as I did, at about the same time (and she accepted it even more readily than I did), so we have been going through this together. Our children were glad they no longer had to go to church, but they still play with the friends they made there. We try not to force our new beliefs on them, but teach them to think about what they see in the world and let them reach their own conclusions.

I can now say that we are happier as a family and as individuals than we have ever been in our lives, for so many reasons. And I believe our happiness will only increase as we grow in knowledge and experience, find ways to make the world a better place, and use our gifts and abilities to bless the lives of others.

¹ St. John 8:32

Respecting the Person

Regardless of how you feel about my story and my beliefs, I hope you still respect me as a person. It's possible that this letter will cause me to lose a few friends, or be ostracized by some family members. Sadly, this has happened to us already. Hopefully, you won't choose to reject me because of what I've said in this letter. I love you just the same as I always have, and at the core, I'm really still the same person, too. It's certainly possible to have rewarding friendships with people who have different beliefs, but I do understand that relationships evolve along with the people in them. At the very least, I hope we can maintain our friendship and respect for one another, despite our differing beliefs.

If you are one of the many who goes to church without really believing, then my leaving the church probably won't cause you any major concern. However, I understand if you are worried about me. Remember, I felt that way when my mom left the church years earlier. Hopefully this letter has helped you understand me better and why I've made this decision. Maybe it's caused you to honestly re-assess your own beliefs. While I don't believe in attacking someone because of their beliefs, I do feel there is great value in objectively examining beliefs and ideas themselves. If you prefer I don't discuss religion around you, let me know, and I won't bring it up with you again. But if you want to talk to me about any of the issues I've addressed, I'd love to hear your thoughts. Likewise, if you see errors in my reasoning or in my references, or if you have other ideas for me to consider, please tell me so I can learn and make appropriate changes. These topics are fascinating to me and I try to remain open to new (and old) ideas.

If you're interested in learning more about the specific issues I brought up in this letter, along with their original sources in church records, one of the most comprehensive websites I've found on the subject is <http://www.mormonthink.com>. This site is written by members of the church, and explains many of these issues thoroughly, from both sides, and in great detail. Of course, it's always a good idea to check the sources on your own as far back as you can (not just relying on the person who quoted the source, whether he is for or against the church), and research all sides of an issue thoroughly before drawing any conclusions.

Thank you for reading, and remember I love you.

Here's to a happy life!

Brandon Pearce

bropearce@brandags.com

<http://pearceonearth.com>

Appendix

To lighten the mood, here are some fun Mormon jokes you may enjoy that I've told many times throughout my life.

Question: Why did the Lamanites have bruised legs?

Answer: Because of all the Nephites! (Knee fights)

Question: Did you know that Lehi had a pet flea?

Answer: Yes, he was commanded to take his family and “flea” into the wilderness.

Question: What was the name of Nephi’s horse?

Answer: Be-unto-you. (Because Nephi was always saying “Woah, Be unto you!”)

Question: How do the leaves get back on the trees in the Spring?

Answer: The Re-leaf society! (I made this one up myself years ago.)