

Pillars of My Faith

"I have been forced by many experiences to pare away at the many things that I might know or believe or experience to some simple essentials."

CHOICE, DESIRE, EXPERIENCE

By Christian E. Kimball

INTRODUCTION

JESUS CHRIST IS MY LORD. I CHOOSE CHRIST. I am a Christian. I am currently serving as a bishop. I am the bishop of the Longfellow Park Ward, meeting in Cambridge, Massachusetts, every Sunday afternoon. I didn't turn off being a bishop to speak at the symposium or turn on being a bishop to speak at sacrament meeting. Being a bishop is a calling, an assignment, a chore, and a blessing. It is part of who I am and what I do right now.

I have found that I am unwilling, and probably unable, to compartmentalize my life so that I can speak with apparent authority and certainty on Sunday, and ask questions about doctrine on Tuesday, and then Friday ask "Do you sustain the other general authorities and local authorities of the Church?" without remembering being angered by some thoughtless comment from a Church leader. One simple response to this inability to compartmentalize is that when I agreed to speak at Sunstone I determined that I would give the same remarks in sacrament meeting. That qualifier may lead some to believe I have necessarily censored myself. It may lead others to believe that there is a wild man serving as bishop in Cambridge. If I had my druthers, I would like you to just think that here is a little man trying to make his way in this world with a smidgen of integrity, who is really trying to give up on the idea of appearances, of looking good.

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ARISTOCRACY

I GREW up in the Church. I grew up going to church. I now understand that I grew up going to a church different than the one many Mormons know.

I grew up in Madison, Wisconsin. As I remember it, the ward included a few local people, a lot of graduate students with their families, and a small, elite group mostly of university professors, with a few of the doctor/lawyer/businessman type. My father was a law school professor, obviously in the elite group, had already been a bishop at age twenty-five. He served in the bishopric essentially all the time I can remember. We were insiders.

I grew up with an aristocratic sense. I didn't know it at the time, of course. I wouldn't have even used the word until a few years ago. What I knew was that I belonged. Even more, whether objectively true or not, I "knew" that I was in training to be a leader. This church was my church, a place to work and serve.

Two quick stories illustrate the kind of world I grew up in.

When I was almost twelve, the youth in the ward visited Nauvoo. It was an almost annual trip, about half a day away. My father thought it would be special for me to be ordained a deacon there. So I was. My father ordained me a deacon, sitting in my great-great-grandfather Heber C. Kimball's desk chair, in a part of his home normally closed to visitors. This all happened ten days before I turned twelve.

I am the only person I have ever met who was ordained to the Aaronic priesthood before he was twelve, although maybe it is more common than I know. I understood that my father secured permission for this "early" ordination from his father, apostle (at the time) Spencer W. Kimball. In fact, Dad probably just asked Grandpa whether there was some inflexible rule,

and then secured permission from our bishop. However, the impression left with me was one of being on an inside track.

It is a privilege to have a father who can give a blessing and perform an ordination. I am grateful for the chance I had this year to ordain my son a deacon. But the combination of father and grandfather and great-great-grandfather, of historic site and exceptions to rules, speaks of a privileged position few can imagine.

The other story that illustrates this aristocratic attitude is from many years later. There is a question Mormons often ask

themselves and each other, at least in private, safe settings: "What do you do if a Church leader tells you to do something that is wrong?" I now can see that the question itself reveals volumes about the hierarchical structure of the Church, perceptions about authority, respect for leaders, and so on. But the question never really bothered me, as a kid or as a teenager or as a young adult. I didn't "get it." I didn't understand why it should be difficult. Then one day my wife asked me very directly, "Well, what *would* you do? Really?" I gave my real answer, which had two parts:

(a) Of course it happens. (I understand that in some circles just acknowledging that a Church leader can tell you to do something wrong is viewed as somewhat radical.)

(b) When it happens, you go talk to the individual leader and teach him, help him see where the error is and how he can do better.

For the first of these—the understanding that the Church is made up of people who are flawed and troubled and sometimes in error, although usually with the best of intentions—I am very thankful. Of course it happens. I never thought otherwise. My heritage includes Edwin D. Woolley, who served as bishop of the Salt Lake Thirteenth Ward for twenty-seven years, from 1854 to 1881. As bishop, he had a run-in with Brigham Young, then president of the Church, over some business use of Church property. As the argument went back and forth, Apostle George A. Smith proposed that Bishop Woolley "take a mission in Europe" as a way to solve the problem. At that point, Edwin immediately stood, apologized, asked for forgiveness, and said, "Don't send me on a mission to atone for what I have done. Punish me at home rather." Reading the history, I can't tell who was in the wrong or the right. But after this discussion, or one similar to it, President Young remarked, "Well, I suppose now you are going to go off and apostatize." Edwin Woolley replied "No, I won't. If this were your church I

might, but it's just as much mine as it is yours."

My second response—"When it happens, teach the leader what is wrong and how to do better"—may be the right answer. At least it is a good one, if incomplete. However, I am only gradually learning that it is far from the typical response. In me, it reflects an arrogance and self-assuredness and sense of confidence and ownership about the Church that is embarrassing; it has been an obstacle in my efforts to understand and empathize and see the Church as it is experienced by most.

THE CRACKS

CRACKS started appearing when I got to be eighteen.

That summer, I expected to be ordained an elder, on schedule. Everything had happened on schedule to that point. But the bishop didn't call. Time passed, and still he didn't call. I started to worry that he knew something was wrong with me. I read about the Melchizedek Priesthood. I thought about it. Another month went by. After two or three months, I figured the bishop wasn't going to call. I decided that it was a chance to not follow the program in lock-step but to really decide for myself. I prayed and I fasted and I read the scriptures. I sought a testimony. I sought confirmation.

I knew the answer I wanted, of course. I didn't want to disappoint or make any major change in my life plan, but I wanted confirmation. I spent a lot of time praying and searching.

Nothing happened. No revelation. No burning in the bosom. No still, small voice. Nothing.

I then made a pivotal decision. I decided that the Church made sense—I basically agreed with the teachings. It was how I was taught and how I understood the world. I wanted that life; it looked good to me. So, very clear and conscious of what I was doing, I *chose* the Church. I decided to act as though I knew it was true. To act as though I had a testimony. It seemed to me that I had to make a choice, because I was not directed or told. So I chose.

I do not know the path my life would have taken with a different choice. I will never know. Very possibly, I was psychologically incapable of making a different choice at the time, and so the idea of choice may be false in some deep sense. But to me it felt like choosing. It felt like deciding. It still does. As I learn more, as I grow, as my heart is broken on the wheel again and again, I choose again. I do not guarantee the choice for all time, but for today I choose.

FOR years, I had the feeling that "if they really knew me, they would know that I don't belong." As a bishop, I have listened to confessions and felt an incredible and instant love for the individual. I cannot hold my own shame in the same place that I feel that love.

Choosing is a source of power and strength for me. I have enjoyed a rich variety of spiritual experiences. I have had opportunities to teach and to give blessings and to ordain and to pray. I have been able to take the sacrament. That is important to me. There are numerous ways I can say that it was a good choice. But in the end, as at the beginning, there is a choice. I choose to be here.

The second crack came with my mission. My mission is where I failed:

I wasn't an assistant to the president.

I worked in an area where we could not find anybody to teach, and I didn't work very hard in that area, and I was depressed. I broke a serious mission rule by writing to a girl in the mission. I stopped when I confessed. Perhaps I should never have started, but I now think the greater sin was to abruptly stop writing to someone with whom I had developed a loving, caring, supportive relationship, with never any explanation, with never another word.

So I failed to excel. I failed to do a passable job. I failed even to keep the rules, gaining for myself what I thought was a permanent black mark on the records of the Church and a fall from aristocratic grace. And I committed a greater sin, hurting an individual and turning my back on an important relationship.

When I left the mission home for the last time, I turned off my mission. I went cold. I put it behind me. It was not until the last two years that I have started to acknowledge and explore how difficult my mission was, and how many trails of pain it left in me. Some of the real difficulties became clear only in the last year. For example, against all that I rationally know, I believed in my heart of hearts that there really was a file in Salt Lake City with a black mark in it regarding my mission, and that as a result—an accumulation of all the bad things—I would never be called as a bishop. Nobody would ever trust me to do a temple recommend interview. I guess they let one slip by.

The legacy of my mission is one of brokenness, of displacement. Not that my mission was the only place where I sinned or erred or failed. Far from it. But it was the beginning of feeling broken. For years I had the feeling that "if they really knew me, they would know that I don't belong." Serving as an elders quorum president, a high councilor, and in a bishopric, I kept thinking, "If they really knew, they would reject me." When I walked into the temple, I looked over my shoulder to see if someone was about to tap me on the shoulder, to suggest that it would better for me to leave.

For a long time, this feeling meant hiding. It meant putting on a face to be at church. It meant acting. Gradually, I have learned better. Mostly I have learned by service, by sitting or standing on the other side. I have listened to confessions and felt an incredible and instant love for the individual. I cannot hold my own shame in the same place that I feel that love. I have worked in the temple, not just as a patron, but also as a veil worker and as part of the cleaning crew on a Monday morning. I think the cleaning crew work was the best. I polished woodwork. I can do that work. It is good work.

Another crack occurred in 1988. A very close friend came to a crisis of faith. His tradition was Roman Catholic, but he was distant from and critical of his church. He was broken and hungry and looking for God. It was my missionary opportunity. It was the time to gently teach him about the restored gospel, and guide him to a new understanding. Or so it would seem.

We were in Utah at the time, for one semester. I spent hours walking in the foothills above Provo, mornings in the mountains, praying, trying to figure out what to do. The best I could ever determine was to advise Tom to return to the church of his childhood, to there seek faith, to there seek God. The answer, the conclusion, did not in any way amount to "Mormonism is wrong and Catholicism is right." Right and wrong, truth, priesthood power, restoration and apostasy—none of that seemed to matter. What seemed to matter was that for that man in that time, the next step toward faith and joy and a walk with God was in and through the Catholic Church. Not for me. Not then. Probably not ever, although I have been comfortable and peaceful and spiritually fed at mass in Tom's parish. But for Tom, it was the next step. I have seen Tom grow and learn and feel joy and experience God. I do not doubt or have second thoughts about my suggestion at the time. But it was certainly a break from tradition for me.

There is no way and no need to tell the full story of my life. But for this purpose, the final cracking and creaking has occurred as a bishop. So many questions. So many doubts and challenges and difficulties. So much that I don't know and can't answer. Mostly I listen. Sometimes listening is helpful. Most of us most of the time know what we need to do, if we will take time to think and talk and pray. Sometimes I know what to say. I am grateful that it does happen.

THE PILLARS

AND so, having been broken, having cracked at many seams, what is there to sustain me? Why am I here? I guess my story about the cracks is long because the story about the pillars is short. I have been forced by these many experiences to pare away at the many things that I might know or believe or experience to some simple essentials. I group them in three categories, three pillars of my faith: choice and desire and experience.

First, a note about those words. This is the spot for a testimony. The common language of a testimony is "I know the gospel is true. I know the Church is true." And so on. This pattern suggests that we have a common understanding of what it means to "know" and a common understanding of what "true" means. It also suggests "knowing" that something is "true" is both a necessary and sufficient cause for action.

I missed the cultural boat, somewhere along the way. I don't seem to share a common understanding of "true" or of "know," and so it is difficult to use those words. Most important, to the extent I can put meaning to the words, "knowing" that something is "true" does not seem to be either a necessary or a sufficient cause for action. So I think in terms of *choice* and *desire*

and *experience*. These three work together. To list one first is to misstate their position. No pillar can be first or last. All stand together.

Choice:

- I choose to be here. I am not compelled by knowledge or experience or witness. I choose.
- I choose Christ as my Lord. Again, I am not compelled by knowledge or experience or witness. It is a choice. I choose to be a Christian.

Desire:

- I find that I want to pray. And when I pray, I want to kneel. That is important. It is tangible, physical. I kneel. I don't need analysis. I don't need logic. I want to pray.
- I find that I want to participate in the sacrament. I want to take the bread and the water, in remembrance, in renewal, as the living water and the bread of life. I don't need analysis. I don't need logic. I want to partake.

- I find that I want to be in the temple. I want to participate in the ordinances and ceremonies and rituals there. I don't need analysis. I don't need logic. I want to be there.

Experience:

- I recognize, I acknowledge, I experience God, who knows me—knows me through and through, every fiber, every strand, every experience and lesson and word and deed. That God I love.
- I have given blessings and spoken beyond myself. I have been an instrument for God's work. Sometimes. Not always. Not consistently. But sometimes. Those are joyous experiences.

It is a short list. Three pillars—some choices, some desires, some experiences. That is why I stand. Working out my salvation in fear and trembling. Walking the plain road.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen. 



MYSTERY

That increasingly intimidating faculty
of my bee-hive mind, where words
willingly assume the shapes of birds,
of mountain peaks gleaming with gold
sophistries of an undying sun,
and become words once again,
impels me to go down town
when I'm at a poem on
the anomalous expansion of my own
nothingness. A pretty lady lives there:
her eyes butterflies, her whispers
fire-flies. This is what distracts me.

Perhaps I shall never be able to
go back to my poem. How does it matter?
I'm not sure if I could
write poems before the silence.
Yet I'm certain now that my words
would become butterflies, fire-flies.

—NIRANJAN MOHANTY