

TURNING THE TIME OVER TO . . .

Jared Christensen

MY GREAT DILEMMA

CHURCH-WISE, THINGS are pretty blurry for me right now. I'm angry, frustrated, and bewildered; yet, paradoxically, I also feel like my need for spirituality and my commitment to finding truth have never been stronger. I grew up in an environment where Mormonism was synonymous with perfection, swimming in a pool of "the Church *has* to be true; it makes so much sense," and "I know beyond a shadow of a doubt." During my teenage years, I never had a strong desire to seek that unwavering testimony of the Church that those around me seemed to possess. For me, it was enough to believe and practice, not necessarily to know.

I had always wanted to serve a mission. Like many young Latter-day Saints, I'm sure my desire to be a missionary grew from a collage of feelings and hopes from family, friends, my Church community, and myself. As the time to depart neared, I was faced with obstacles that threatened both my desire and eligibility to serve. During this time of turmoil, I often asked myself if it was really worth it for me to go.

To this day, I thank God for a loving and understanding mother, whose life experiences had molded her into a perfect friend. Her advice was invaluable, and I wish her advice could be given by every parent to every child in my situation. She said, "I want you to go, but if you don't think you can do it, I'll support you. I love you, and your life will be okay if you don't go." I knew that she meant it. I knew that she very much wanted me to go, but I knew that she would love and support me if I didn't. All the pressure and stress dissipated. What others wanted me to do suddenly became a non-factor.

I decided to go. I didn't pray about it, and I didn't try to find an answer in the scriptures. Neither was necessary. I knew that I needed to go for myself, to become the person that I wanted to become. This answer came from deep within, finally breaking

through a culture's burdensome pressure. My decision came just a week before I left, and that final week was one of the happiest of my life. For the first time in months, I felt no anxiety. Not only was I excited, but I felt worthy to go. I thank God for a loving stake president who followed his heart and trusted God's grace more than words in the handbook.

The day I entered the MTC, I received a gift: a desire to find truth. I struggled in the MTC with my testimony of the Book of Mormon and of Joseph Smith. I desperately wanted to know what was true. I yearned to know what God wanted me to know. One night in the MTC, I dedicated my life to seeking God's truth, whatever it was and wherever it came from. I decided to trust God to be my guide.

Brigham Young describes perfectly what I felt at this time:

It is our duty and calling, as ministers of the same salvation and Gospel, to gather every item of truth and reject every error. Whether a truth be found with professed infidels, or with . . . [any] of the various and numerous different sects and parties, all of whom have more or less truth, it is the business of the Elders of this Church to gather up all the truths in the world pertaining to life and salvation, to the Gospel we preach, to mechanism of every kind, to the sciences, and to philosophy, wherever it may be found in every nation, kindred, tongue, and people and bring it to Zion.¹

I became consumed with reading, studying, searching, pondering. This started in the MTC and continued when I left for my mission field in Columbus, Ohio. By the end of my first three months in the field, I had finished the standard works and the missionary library. I often stayed up into the late hours of

night, deprived of sleep but nourished with knowledge. I continued to read anything and everything.

My first area was filled with anti-Mormons and sects of every kind. Everyone seemed to be out to prove us wrong. Most missionaries would reply to anti-Mormon rhetoric by simply asserting that "it's not true." They'd say this whether or not they even knew what the person was talking about. Remembering President Young's advice to "gather every item of truth, and reject every error," I decided to investigate for myself the claims of the people whom I was trying to convert.

To this day, I am puzzled by the Church's response to anti-Mormon material. To me, the response seems filled with contradictions. On the one hand, it claims that anti-Mormon material is twisted truth, lies, and false information. On the other hand, we are told that this material will make us question our testimony and faith. Early in my mission, I asked myself, "If it is all lies and false propaganda, then how could it challenge my faith?" I soon learned the truth: it wasn't all lies.

S UDDENLY, I felt myself becoming like my father, even though I never really knew him. In 1985, when I was three years old, my father, Steve Christensen, fell victim to Mark Hofmann in the Salt Lake City bombings. During the years that followed, I learned from others that my father had been a seeker of truth. I heard stories of how he'd stay up all night reading. I often found myself doing the same. A close friend of my father's told me, "He had the desire to question, without doubting."

I decided on my mission to read the books that had been written about the bombings and the surrounding events. What I found changed everything. For the first time, I had to face concerns that threatened everything I'd been taught all my life. My determination to "gather every item of truth, and reject every error" took on a different meaning. How could I reject every error when so many of them existed within my own church? My father once stated, "I honestly fear that our sanitized curriculum lessons do not prepare our membership for an encounter with the dark side of Church history and the development of the doctrine."² I wholeheartedly agree.

The books about the bombings led me to others. Fawn McKay Brodie's *No Man Knows My History*, Richard Abanes's *One Nation Under Gods*, the writings of Jerald and Sandra Tanner, E.D. Howe, and others became a part of my study. I also read pro-Church material



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such as many works by Hugh Nibley, FARMS, and others strongly positive toward Mormonism and religion in general. I wanted to read any writing that had to do with Mormonism, regardless of whether it was “pro” or “anti.”

After about a year of my mission, nothing that I read could surprise me. I could tell I had changed. I realized that I was no longer like most of the other missionaries around me. To me, most blindly obeyed. It was puzzling to me that other missionaries didn't want to study out the very things we were supposed to be teaching. I became very discouraged as I'd talk with other missionaries or hear their responses to investigators. For example:

INVESTIGATOR: Why did your church practice polygamy?

MISSIONARY: Polygamy started when the Saints made their trek to Salt Lake City. The Lord brought forth polygamy so the widows of the Church would have support as they made the long and exhausting trip and as they settled into their new lives in the Great Basin.

INVESTIGATOR: But didn't polygamy start with Joe Smith?

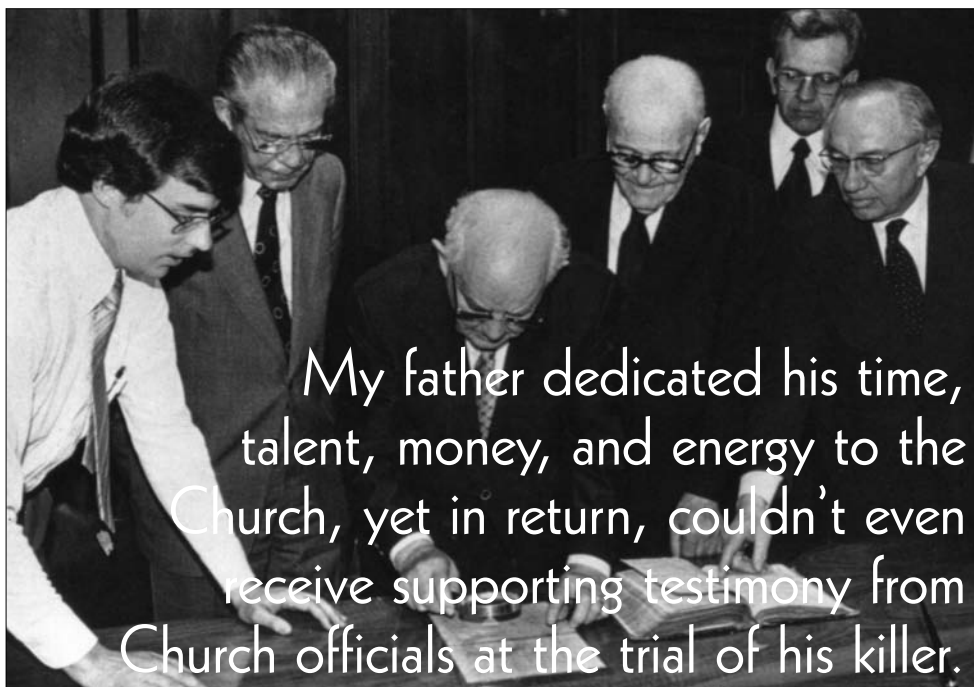
MISSIONARY: No, it was Brigham Young who started it.

I wanted to tell investigators and my companions the truth. I wanted to tell them that Joseph practiced polygamy secretly beginning in 1833 and continued until his death.³ I wanted to tell them to really read the heading of D&C 132. I wanted them to know the truth, including the fact that some of Joseph's plural wives were already the wives of other men and that some were teenagers. In my reading, I had come across the following statement by Joseph Smith:

The doctrine of the Latter-day Saints is truth. . . . Now, sir, you may think that it is a broad assertion that it is truth; but sir, the first and fundamental principle of our holy religion is that we believe that we have a right to embrace all and every item of truth, without limitation or without being circumscribed or prohibited by the creeds or superstitious notions of men.⁴

Why shouldn't we as missionaries be trusted with all the truth? And why shouldn't we be as up front as possible with investigators?

Near the end of my mission, the sisters in my zone asked me to assist them in teaching



In 1980, Mark Hofmann (left) shows documents to LDS Church leaders (l to r) Presidents N. Eldon Tanner, Spencer W. Kimball, and Marion G. Romney, and Apostles Boyd K. Packer, and Gordon B. Hinckley.

Larry, one of their new investigators. Larry had been carefully studying the Church for a month and was very interested in joining, yet he was puzzled and concerned with things he had read. Knowing I was versed in some of the things he had studied, the sisters brought me in. It was a pretty ironic situation. All of Larry's concerns matched mine. When he would bring up a subject, the other three missionaries would look to me for a response, either having never heard of what he was talking about, or feeling inadequate about their knowledge on the subject. My responses were just that—*responses*, not rebuttals. I found myself saying, “That's true, Larry.” His response would be, “Well, how can this be?” and I could only answer with empathy.

WHEN members have doubts about their belief in the Church, they will often say that “some answers we just won't know until the next life.” This attitude doesn't bother me. I'm no longer looking for answers to questions. I've found answers to most of them, and it's those answers that bother me!

On my mission, and now, I am puzzled and bothered by many things. They include but are not limited to the following: Joseph and polygamy (and the dishonesty and secrecy involved); the altering of many revelations and books; false prophecies; the Mountain Meadows Massacre; the changing

of the Word of Wisdom from “wisdom” to a commandment; post-Manifesto plural marriages; the Reed Smoot hearings (especially Joseph F. Smith's testimony); the withholding of priesthood and temple blessings from blacks and racist ideas held by Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and other Church leaders continuing into the twentieth century, and the Church's refusal (so far) to repudiate teachings about Cain's curse and supposed lack of valiance in the pre-Earth life; the connection between Masonry and the temple endowment and the subsequent evolution of the ceremony; and the Adam-God theory (not the theory itself, but the Church's spin doctoring about the doctrine's history).

Of course, I'm also troubled by more recent events. It is hard for me to read the words of Apostle Russell M. Nelson as he describes God's love as conditional. I also struggle with President Packer's teaching that “some things that are true are not very useful” and his emphasis on telling only one-sided, faith-promoting aspects of our Church's history, thereby ignoring the complexity of many persons and issues. I also have trouble understanding why, given the Church's renewed emphasis on Latter-day Saints being Christians, our leaders still back away from fully emphasizing Jesus's role as God and our Creator and Father.⁵

Yet my greatest heartache stems from the events surrounding my father's death. If, as the Book of Mormon teaches, “a seer can

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know of things which are past, and also of things which are to come, . . . and things which are not known shall be made known by them, and also things shall be made known by them which otherwise could not be known” (Mos. 8:17), why didn’t the prophets, seers, and revelators discover the intents of a murderer and forger? Why couldn’t they discern the intents of Hofmann’s heart like Alma and other prophets from scripture could?

Although these are hard questions, my heartache is intensified even more from my understanding that my father helped top Church authorities attempt to hide documents that could damage the Church’s reputation and shake the faith of its members. If, as the prophet Joseph stated, “our doctrine is truth,” then what do we have to hide?

But my heartache goes even deeper, for it’s been almost unbearable to look at the way Church officials handled the murder investigation of my father. While investigators were trying to find the killer, Church leaders were unwilling to give information that only they knew. It was more than a lack of cooperation; in some cases, their evasiveness bordered on outright lying.⁶ My father had dedicated his time, talent, money, and energy to the Church, yet in return, he didn’t even receive supporting testimony from Church officials during the trial of his killer.

All of the issues above have created for me what I call “my great dilemma.” I find it nearly impossible to give a sustaining vote to men who I feel abandoned my family in a most critical time. I don’t mean to sound negative and angry, only to say what I feel and know to be true.

SO why do I have a dilemma at all? Why don’t I just walk away? What keeps me believing in this faith? Simply stated, it is that although my intellect will no longer allow me to believe in the Church, my deepest spiritual self believes strongly in many things intimately connected with Mormonism.

Despite the many faults and sins of the prophet Joseph, I believe in him. I’ve had two experiences which have given me a deep spiritual confirmation of his divine calling. One of these came during the dedication of the Nauvoo temple. I will never forget that feeling. It continually pries at my intellect,

consistently reminding me that there’s “something there.”

I believe in the Book of Mormon. Do I necessarily believe that Nephites and Lamanites actually existed? No, I don’t. But I do believe this book can teach us divine principles. I have felt the love of God as I’ve read this book. The Book of Mormon has taught me that Christ is not only my Lord and Savior but also my Father and my God. It has helped me want to love and understand others as Christ loves and understands me.

I believe we were put in families for a purpose and that these relationships will endure into the next realm. This I believe despite Church teachings about a separation into various kingdoms in the next life. To quote my father, “Heaven [is] not going to be divided between good Mormons and good people.”⁷ I believe we lived as spirits in a pre-earth life, that there is eternal progression in the afterlife. I believe in visions, healing, and deep spirituality.

In the 1985 Sunstone Symposium, just two months before he was killed, my father gave a talk titled “The Informed Believer.” It has been an inspiration to me. In it, he said that “in spite of unanswered questions or unwanted answers—I believe because I feel it is true.”⁸ This is my feeling. Despite unwanted answers, my soul also believes it is true.

DESPITE my turmoil, I thank God for my mission and the months that have passed since I came home. I am grateful for the opportunity I had to serve in the Ohio Columbus mission, where I learned the most important of all life’s lessons: the love that God has for his children. To quote Nephi: “I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things.” (1 Ne 11:17) I felt this love from him, and I tried to give this same love to others.

I am grateful for this Church for many reasons. It has become my passion. I have dedicated these years to studying its history and doctrines. My search has fostered spiritual and intellectual growth that I could never have imagined. I will continue to trust in my God, Jesus Christ. I hope and pray that he will continue to guide me in truth.

During the 2003 Salt Lake Sunstone symposium, Paul Toscano stated that he had lost “faith in the power of [his] words to make a

difference.”⁹ Although I know he believes that statement, it is not true. His words saved me during a critical time on my mission. I didn’t find answers in his writings, but I found empathy. For the first time, I knew that someone else understood my feelings, someone had the same concerns and conflicts.

Because of this, I feel it is important for us to share our souls with each other. I hope we will continue to “prove all things [and] hold fast that which is good” (1 Thes. 5:21). When dealing with conflicting issues within our faith, I hope we will remember the prophet Joseph’s comments that “by proving contraries, truth is made manifest.”¹⁰ ☪

NOTES

1. *Journal of Discourses* Vol. 7:283.
2. Steven F. Christensen, “The Informed Believer,” paper delivered at the 1985 Salt Lake Sunstone Theological Symposium, typescript in author’s possession.
3. Historian Todd Compton argues Smith married sixteen-year-old Fannie Alger in 1833. See Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997): 25–28.
4. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1984): 420.
5. Russell M. Nelson, “Divine Love,” *Ensign* (Feb. 2003): 20–25; Boyd K. Packer, “The Mantle is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect,” *BYU Studies* 21 (Summer 1981): 259–78. An example of a failure to acknowledge Jesus’s full role can be found in Elder Jeffrey R. Holland’s recent conference address, “The Grandeur of God,” *Ensign* (Nov. 2003): 70–73. Although in his account of Enoch’s vision of God (Moses 7) he describes God’s love wonderfully, Elder Holland doesn’t explain that this God is Jesus Christ, or Jehovah, the god of the Old Testament.
6. At a press conference and later in interviews with investigators, Church leaders seemed to act as if they could barely remember my dad or Mark Hofmann, often reminding detectives that they had hundreds of visitors a year in their offices. In reality, Church leaders worked with both my dad and Hofmann to obtain the “Salamander letter” and the McLellin collection, even securing a \$185,000 loan that would reportedly allow Hofmann to close the deal on the latter. Church officials seemed concerned about the purported contents of the collection and the effect they would have on the faith of some members. See Linda Sillitoe and Allen Roberts, *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998): 3–4; 86–91; 125–30; 178; 284–92; 324–57.
7. *Salamander*, 196.
8. “The Informed Believer.”
9. See Paul James Toscano, “An Interview with Myself,” page 17 of this issue.
10. *History of the Church*, Vol. 6:428.