

Many have approached me wanting to know my rationale for leaving the church. I had originally written this for Mark, but, in the interest of time, I have decided to make it public so that I wouldn't have to constantly repeat myself.

Hey Mark,

Thanks so much for the thoughtful post. I really do appreciate it, as I appreciate your dedication to bringing goodness to the world. Thus far, I have mostly withheld my specific concerns from the public eye for fear of damaging others' faith. You seem to understand a lot of the basic issues, so I wanted to explain myself a little further, not to persuade but to be understood by someone for whom I have great respect.

This is the first attempt I have made at compiling an overview of my concerns. Please forgive the longwindedness. You don't even need to feel obligated to read it all. I don't care to persuade anyone. As you have pointed out, if the Church can produce people like my parents, then its existence is validated. Again, I write only to be understood.

When I said that the Gospel was my life, I meant it. You know how committed my parents are to the Gospel. I think I learned to read with the Book of Mormon. I was probably the only 6 year old who could tell you that Ammon fed Lamoni's sheep at the Waters of Sebus. When I was 14 or 15, I read Mormon Doctrine (the 1st edition!) twice and became absolutely fascinated with Mormon theology. After that, I read every gospel-related book I could get my hands on. I read all the standard works, including several readings of the Book of Mormon. During freshman year of college, I read the biographies of Joseph Smith, Gordon B. Hinckley, Ezra Taft Benson, Howard W. Hunter, Bruce R. McConkie, Neal A. Maxwell, and Spencer W. Kimball (since then I've also added Thomas S. Monson, J. Reuben Clark, Hugh B. Brown, and David O. McKay to the list). I read conference talk after conference talk and all I listened to was the Tabernacle Choir. This wasn't a sort of academic scrupulosity; I truly LOVED Mormonism.

Though I felt I had had powerful experiences with God, I never received "the answer" about the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith, or the church. That caused me a lot of stress in high school because I felt like I was somehow unworthy of an answer. Despite my doubts, I continued to study and pray, hoping that the answer would come. The stress I felt in high school was compounded in the MTC. Finally I concluded that I already knew it was true and continued anyway. I don't think this is an adequate response to the Book of Mormon's promise, but at the time it helped me avoid a lot of the [cognitive dissonance](#) that could have disturbed my otherwise enriching mission.

A year or so after my mission I was asked by my roommate why the priesthood was withheld from blacks for so long. Around that same time, a recent-convert friend asked me if Joseph Smith really did have 40 wives and if some were only 14 years old. I gave a basic response to both of them with the promise that I would do some further investigation.

You already know the punchline of this anecdote. I discovered that church leaders weren't, as I

had been taught, awaiting with eagerness the day that blacks would receive the priesthood. They were [straight-up racists](#). Not only did they officially embrace racist religious discrimination, they also opposed the Civil Rights movement and condemned [integration and interracial marriage](#) (this is well documented in the book, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* by LDS scholar Gregory Prince).

All my life I had acknowledged theoretically that prophets were fallible, but never had their fallibility become a practical concern. That paradigm was suddenly shattered. If past prophets could lead the church astray to such a terrifying degree only to have the doctrines they taught condemned by later leaders, how could I have any confidence that the current leaders were any more inspired?

This problem was compounded as I studied Brigham's [Adam-God doctrine](#) which taught that Adam was the physical Father of Christ and the Father of our spirits. Contrary to Spencer W. Kimball or Bruce R. McConkie's statements, it wasn't a fleeting opinion poorly expressed and later twisted by fundamentalists. It was something he taught boldly and frequently and was fully embraced by the leadership of the church (save Orson Pratt) until about Joseph F. Smith. It was even [incorporated into the temple endowment](#). Joseph Smith said a correct understanding of the nature of God was necessary to exercise faith. So why did Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and Spencer W. Kimball all teach different things about the fundamental nature of God?

I became horrified as I studied the [blood atonement](#) doctrine that began with Joseph Smith but came to full fruition in Utah with the [Mountain Meadows Massacre](#), vengeance oaths in the temple, murders of adulterers and "apostates," as well as [mob-inflicted castration of an innocent man](#) led by a Bishop who Brigham Young sustained after the act, saying, "Many will be made eunuchs for the kingdom's sake." The doctrine taught that some sins, like adultery and apostasy, could not be covered by the blood of Christ and that the person must be killed to atone for their own sins.

I'm sure, if you've studied these things, that you understand the kind of confusion and pain this caused me. The house of faith I built began crumbling. I looked to Joseph Smith for answers. What I found made everything much worse.

I was troubled by the acknowledgment in the [church essays](#) that Joseph did marry 14 year olds (an unacceptable age even at that time) as well as women who were already married after sending their husbands on missions (contrary to the stipulations provided in Section 132). Not only that, but he lied on multiple occasions about it. I felt not only confused, but worse, betrayed by the church. Why wasn't I taught [this](#)? Why the secrecy?

At that point I didn't know who to turn to for answers. I just wanted to know the truth. That's when I took a leap down the rabbit hole. As I read about the [anachronisms](#) in the Book of Mormon (horses (which apparently are actually tapirs), metallurgy, quotes from Shakespeare, borrowed Bible verses, etc.) I was shattered. I looked into the apologist responses but found

them lacking in integrity and logic. This letter contains many of my concerns about the Book of Mormon: <http://cesletter.com/Letter-to-a-CES-Director.pdf>.

My appeal to Joseph failed. His experience as a fraudulent glass-looker who dabbled in the occult (peep stones, treasure digging, divining rods, incantations, talismans, Jupiter stones, etc.) worried me. My doubts about the Book of Mormon were overwhelming. His [polygamous practices](#) were likewise extremely troubling.

This was the hardest time of my life. I used to drive out to the fields in Rexburg and pray out loud for hours, [begging God for some light](#), but it never came. Jesus said, "What man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone?" I begged for a loaf and received nothing. I would have taken a stone over the silence.

Still, I wasn't ready to throw in the towel. I felt that I still had a testimony of Christ so I decided to build from ground zero. I would read everything ever written by Joseph Smith. I would study his life (*Rough Stone Rolling*) and his teachings (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, *Lectures on Faith*, *The Doctrine and Covenants*). It was basically the Mormon version of [Pascal's wager](#).

With some effort, I managed to forget a lot of my concerns about Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. I preferred to pin most of the ills of the church on his successors. I had this idea that Joseph Smith had come to restore the fulness of the Gospel, but that the fulness had been more or less rejected by the saints and it was for this reason that none of our leaders actually prophesy, "see" or reveal.

During the last year I was spending, no exaggeration, 5-6 hours a day studying and processing. Rather than assuaging my concerns, it exacerbated them. Seemingly EVERY aspect of the restored gospel became suspect. Still, if you followed my Facebook posts over the year, you've seen that while I was obviously trying to sort out some concerns, I was trying to promote faith. The whole time, I never ceased praying, begging to God for something.

The book [Origins of Power](#) by faithful historian Michael Quinn demonstrated how Joseph significantly changed his revelations and added important details years later to make them more stunning. This included significant doctrinal [changes in the Book of Mormon](#), striking differences in the [First Vision](#) story (in one account an angel appeared, in another account it was just Jesus, in another account it was the Father and the Son), and the inclusion of angels granting apostolic authority ([David Whitmer](#) said this was nonsense added years after the fact. Nobody in the early church had heard anything about it).

I reopened my concerns about the Book of Mormon. Why take such pain to preserve the plates if Joseph didn't even have them in the room when he translated them? Why include the urim and thummim if Joseph was only going to use the peep stone that he had used before during his failed [money digging](#) attempts?

As you are aware, the church has acknowledged that the [Book of Abraham](#) is not an accurate translation of the Egyptian papyrus. His attempt at translating the counterfeit [Kinderhook Plates](#) demonstrated his inability to discern truth from fiction (much like the later [Mark Hoffman fiasco](#) where the leaders of the church were duped by forgeries. At first they tried weaving the bizarre additions into the “traditional narrative,” but then later changed when it was disproven). There were other false revelations as well, including a revelation to sell the Canadian copyright of the Book of Mormon.

The temple endowment, with its gruesome penalties (slitting the throat, ripping out the tongue, etc.), was an obvious plagiarism of [Masonic rites](#). In the church we love to talk about sealed families. Yet even the sealing power is problematic. Joseph Smith was taking on plural wives before he had the sealing power. Joseph was “sealed” to a plural wife before he was even sealed to Emma.

Did the sealing power continue in the church? How could it when the revelations clearly state that the sealing power was only possessed by one person at a time and was given by the mouth of God (D&C 132)? Brigham Young didn’t get it from Joseph Smith (contrary to the popular narrative). He was ordained by the Three Witnesses long before the issue of the sealing power came up.

Brigham wasn’t even Joseph Smith’s obvious successor. Joseph had given a revelation naming Hyrum, Joseph III, and even the High Council of Zion (not the Quorum of the Twelve) as potential successors. Brigham jockeyed his way into leadership during the [succession crisis](#), radically reformatting the original format of the church to centralize his power. The story of him being transfigured to look like Joseph was a fabrication that developed years after the fact. No [contemporary sources](#) describe such an event.

Well did Brigham say: “A person was mentioned to-day who did not believe that Brigham Young was a Prophet, Seer, and Revelator. I wish to ask every member of this whole community, if they ever heard him profess to be a Prophet, Seer, and Revelator, as Joseph Smith was? . . . Who ordained me to be First President of this Church on earth? I answer, It is the choice of this people, and that is sufficient...(*Journal of Discourses*, 6:320)

“The brethren testify that brother Brigham is brother Joseph's legal successor. You never heard me say so. I say that I am a good hand to keep the dogs and wolves out of the flock. I do not care a groat who rises up. I do not think anything about being Joseph's successor.” (*Journal of Discourses* 8:69.)

If Brigham Young didn't get the sealing power from Joseph and didn't get it from the voice of God, where did he get it from?

When he, Heber C. Kimball, John Taylor, and (ironically) Wilford Woodruff prophesied in the name of the Lord that if the people ever abandoned polygamy the priesthood would be taken from them, was it taken?

If it wasn't taken, how did it continue during the administration of President Heber J. Grant when, for 20 years, it was not conferred, but instead, men and women were simply ordained to church offices?

Joseph Smith said that a change in the temple ordinances would mean a change in the priesthood and that those ordinances should remain the same throughout all time. You and I both know how they (and the garments which used to have more markings and other "unchangeable" features) have [changed drastically](#). I'm sure there are responses that are satisfying for people, but at face value, this does present a serious concern.

There is also the Council of 50, with its violent, and even treasonous agenda (I mean, he did intend to replace the government of the United States). When the Nauvoo Expositor told TRUTHS about polygamy and the council of 50, Joseph ordered the press to be destroyed. I'm sorry, that just doesn't sound like the action of an innocent man.

I'm sure there are many other things that I have failed to mention here. I've focused mainly on early church history. I could write another five pages about the contradictions, deceptions, and abuses of authority in modern times.

For each of these things, I have tried to see from a faithful perspective. I tried to make it all work. Even though six months ago [I started feeling really agnostic](#), I decided to commit my life to love and activity in the church, hoping that God would appreciate my struggle and sacrifice.

A month or two ago I came to the conclusion that my Pascal's wager wouldn't work with the God of Mormonism. The God of Mormonism is not the God of love.

Here's a (hopefully) quick illustration:

Jesus summed up the commandments with this statement: "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets."

Nephi goes to get the plates (which could have just been revealed to him just like the dozens of chapters of other revelations that were given to him) from Laban. He finds Laban drunk and is told BY THE SPIRIT, to slay him. This is entirely unnecessary. God could have easily killed Laban himself. God could have kept Laban in a stupor long enough for Nephi to escape. But we

tell each other that Nephi had to learn to be obedient.

This is key.

According to the Golden Rule of Jesus, a person should treat others how they want to be treated. Would Nephi want to be slain? Would Christ teach such violent vengeance? I doubt it.

So in this case, Nephi did not learn how to love (which would be the ideal if God were actually Love), but to be obedient. If obedience is more important to God than love, is it correct to say God is love? Shouldn't we rather say God is obedience?

The God of Obedience is problematic. The God of Obedience is the definition of moral relativity. What is right one day is wrong the next. In a [letter](#) attributed to Joseph Smith, written to seduce Nancy Rigdon, it is said, "That which is wrong under one circumstance, may be, and often is, right under another...Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is."

If love is not the ultimate standard, then we have no way of determining whether or not a person's actions are justified. So how can we excuse the actions of Joseph Smith or Brigham Young, but we condemn the exact same actions of Warren Jeffs, Jim Jones, and L. Ron Hubbard?

With the God of Obedience, nothing is off the table. He may command you to sacrifice your child (Abraham), kill your adulterous relative (per Brigham Young), commit genocide (Joshua), own slaves (Moses), have concubines (David), cheat on your spouse ([Joseph Smith, who broke all the laws of polygamy established in Section 132](#)), have sexual relations with children (also Joseph Smith) or behead a drunk man (Nephi).

We condemn ISIS for killing those who disagree with them. Who are we to judge them when our God has commanded and could still command the same thing? Their God is not the God of love; He is the God of Obedience, just like ours.

I thought I loved God my whole life. But as I studied the scriptures I realized I could not love such a God. Rather than a God that was found through love, I saw a God that was found through loyalty tests, which is totally cool in the context of our faith but horrific when we consider the faith of others. The historic prophets (the ones who actually claimed to see God and receive word-for-word revelations from him, not the ones we see today who are constantly contradicting themselves and never adding an ounce of productive understanding to the most pressing issues of the day) were not the most loving people, they were violent, libido-driven, racist, misogynists. I know that sounds harsh, but how else do you call the violence, promiscuity, racism, and misogyny of the scriptures?

I know that many have felt wonderful feelings reading the Book of Mormon. They have their answer that suits them. I respect that. For me personally, there are three ways of determining its

truth: 1) An answer from God according to the promise in Moroni 10 2) Empirical evidence (archaeology, metallurgy, anthropology, genetics, zoology, etc.) 3) Philosophical/doctrinal soundness.

A combination of all three would seem to fit the idea of revelation appealing to the heart and the mind. My problem is that I have never, despite my best efforts (In high school and in the MTC I used to stay up all night praying) had a confirmation by the spirit that the Book of Mormon was true. I can't find any satisfactory empirical evidence that it is a true historical narrative. And I find the philosophical implications of the book very troubling. What am I supposed to do? Should I keep believing when everything tells me it is false?

Should I keep believing in Joseph Smith when he bears all the same earmarks of every other cult leader like Warren Jeffs, Jim Jones, and L. Ron Hubbard (the latter bears extremely fascinating parallels with Joseph Smith. If you haven't seen the documentary, *Going Clear*, I highly recommend it).

As I said in the beginning, I have not written this to try to persuade you or anyone else. I hope that those who read it will at least acknowledge that my departure from the church wasn't a rash decision, but a matter of deep soul searching and diligent effort. Though I am in a better place than I have been in years, I still bear wounds from this process. I am not entirely healed. It is hard to have everything you loved torn away from you. I have not left my religion like an angry child running away from home. I have left it like a weeping widow, devastated by the death of her husband.

I hope those who read this will understand the difficulty that many faithful members of the church deal with on a daily basis. Perhaps those who read this will be less inclined to judge doubters and dissenters as "apostates."

I truly sincerely wish I wasn't in this situation. I hate knowing that I have hurt my family and my friends. I hate knowing that many more people will go through the same ordeal as I have. I hate knowing that some of them will go through it as a direct result of my actions. I don't delight in any of this.

I wish to close with my reassurance that my commitment to kindness has not changed. My dedication to honesty, transparency, and integrity has not changed. I love people more deeply now than I did before. I am much less judgmental. I treasure each moment more fully than I did before. I am happier than I've been in ages.

I love you Mark. I respect you and the choices you have made in life. The world is a much better place for you having been in it. Thank you again for your concern and your ever-present example of sincerity and nobility.

With all my love,

Tanner Gilliland