

Brief Sketch of Events Surrounding My Resignation

My Spiritual and Apologetic Background

I grew up in a highly faithful LDS family,¹ and I was serious about living the Gospel as a child and youth (for instance, I participated in the conversion of a friend during my Senior year of high school), but my fervor for the Gospel diminished somewhat during my late teen years until I went into the MTC.

I was in a pretty low place when I entered the MTC, but I decided to give it my best effort to see if there was any real validity to the Gospel. In the MTC I had strong, confirmatory spiritual experiences,² determined that the Gospel was indeed true, and decided I could do nothing better with my life than to sacrifice it completely for the cause.³ I was a fully dedicated missionary and deeply enjoyed my missionary experience.

Shortly before I started high school, a close relative—who was a member of the Stake Presidency at the time—[left the Church due to “anti-mormon” literature](#). His departure cast a sort of pall over my family’s beliefs and seemed to me like a sort of intellectual challenge just left hanging in the air. Nobody in my family seemed willing or able to mount an intellectual defense against his arguments⁴ so on my mission I

¹Our family was highly faithful to the Church way of life (not perfect, but actively striving). A few examples, off the top of my head:

- We either woke up early for family scripture study or my mom would read scriptures to us at the table growing up fairly regularly.
- We regularly held family home evening (probably > 75% of the time).
- We typically watched every session of conference.
- Our family invited people over for missionary discussions growing up. I helped to convert a friend to the faith when I was in high school, and one of my younger brothers converted his friend.
- Every one of the many children in my family graduated from BYU.
- Every one of the many boys in my family served to completion an LDS mission (and all were effective and diligent as far as I am aware).
- We never watched TV on Sunday.
- My mom always told us stories about forgoing social activities to attend sparsely attended Church activities.
- My mom always told us about how my older brother was thirsty after his game but all they were serving was Coke, so he just went thirsty.
- My grandparents served many missions and also served as a mission president. My parents served a mission immediately upon retirement and are currently serving as service missionaries.

To a large extent, our dedication to the Church ramped up as a response to my close relative leaving.

²I had a very strong spiritual experience one night while praying about the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon (very strong, sustained [feeling of elevation](#)). I also persistently experienced the feelings of the Spirit in the MTC and during my mission. I have persistently felt the feelings of the Spirit throughout my adult life, and until my faith transition always interpreted these as confirmation of the Church’s foundational truth claims.

³An example of my level of devotion was that I had my brother at home throw away my entire “secular” music collection (which I had greatly valued before) because I did not want any distractions to my spiritual development. I also convinced all my younger siblings to throw away all (well, most) of their “secular” music.

⁴My parents never actually shared the arguments or data with us directly, but it was obvious

began an intense study of the apologetic arguments for the Church's truthfulness, attempting to sustain intellectually what I felt certain of spiritually.

I was guided by the idea that if the Gospel was really true then there was no reason to fear investigating it comprehensively.⁵ I reasoned that the problem with my close relative was not that he had studied too much, but that he had not studied deeply enough, and he had not lived with enough dedication to prevent his loss of faith.

From my missionary experience I was very familiar with the tight relationship between spirituality and testimony, so I focused equally intensely on my spiritual development. I consistently tried to live the most important aspects of the Gospel (love, service, and humility) while not neglecting all the other facets that seemed important (scripture study, prayer, fasting, Sabbath observance, magnify callings, do Home Teaching consistently and for the right reasons, etc.).⁶

So, for the past twenty years I remained firm in that pattern of intensely studying apologetics,⁷ focusing on my spiritual development, and building my testimony.⁸

that we had no legitimate answers since my dad would relate to us his response to my close relative in terms like this: "I don't have any answers to these issues, I just know it makes me happy and it's the best system I know to raise children, so I'm going to keep doing it."

⁵I followed after the thinking of Elder George A. Smith:

If a faith will not bear to be investigated, if its preachers and professors are afraid to have it examined; their foundation must be very weak. (Journal of Discourses v 14, p. 216)

⁶Nobody can perfectly observe all the minutia expected of them in the LDS Church, but I feel like I have always tried my best to do the right things for the right reasons (and in tandem with the power/grace of the atonement).

⁷For the past 20 years I studied apologetic defenses for the Church. I've read or am familiar with the essential arguments of virtually every academic (or near academic) work on the topic. For instance, I've read and studied "Mormon's Codex", I've examined the data on the Hopewell Indians, I've studied all the parallelisms in the Book of Mormon, the ancient festival interpretations for King Benjamin's Speech, virtually every issue of the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies and FARMS review of books, virtually everything John Welch, Dan Peterson, Hugh Nibley, and other prominent apologists have written, had a subscription to BYU Studies and generally read all of each issue, had GOSPELLink2001 and the LDS InfoBase and read through gazillions of books and articles there, am familiar most of the arguments of those who've written on polygamy from an apologetic perspective (e.g., Meg Stout, Brian Hales, and am familiar with much of the primary data). I'm also very familiar with every official statement or perspective on these topics (i.e., published in the Ensign or official Church materials). On my mission, for instance, I went through and copied and highlighted every Ensign article that dealt with anything academic or apologetic from about 1965 to the then present day.

⁸It's difficult to quantify spiritual development. Nonetheless, here are some indicators that I took the Gospel and my spiritual development very seriously:

- Read the scriptures virtually every day of my adult life. Read the Book of Mormon over 40 times.
- Gave out dozens of copies of the Book of Mormon as an adult—each with my heartfelt testimony inside—to labmates, friends, and acquaintances. Even as a professor at BYU I continued to give copies to friends who came to visit.
- Listened/read each general conference multiple times through for many years.
- Accepted all callings joyfully. Besides ward finance clerk and EQP, was in scouting (generally scoutmaster) for about 16 years. Recognized for service to underprivileged minority youth.
- No funny business before marriage.
- Showed up at virtually every move.

Of course, even though mounting a defense against my close relative was an initial catalyst and continual motivator, I also enjoyed living the Gospel for its own sake and was happy to be doing the right things for their intrinsic value and not necessarily as a challenge to my close relative—with whom, funny enough, I have never actually had a discussion about the Church to this day!

Investigating Other Models

Over the years, multiple data points that I had come across did not square well with the LDS narratives (or apologetic arguments), and these had piled onto my “shelf” over time.⁹ However, as a faculty member whose paycheck depended on having a temple

-
- Didn’t pick my friends as counselors in the EQ Presidency.
 - Consistently went out of my way to introduce myself to and sit by new people at Church.
 - Personal mission statement: Learn of Christ. Serve as Christ. Love as Christ.
 - My extended family got sick of me sincerely asking at every opportunity: “did you learn anything interesting at Church?” or “any new Gospel insights?”.
 - Always fasted on fast Sunday; fasted many other times for other purposes.
 - Planned to work in industry (was applying to Pharma and biotech companies), but ended up teaching at BYU—I applied because I was strongly encouraged to apply. BYU needed me, so I answered the call.
 - My wife had 4 children before I finished grad school. The 5th while living in an 800 square foot apartment completing my postdoctoral work. The 6th as a beginning professor. She had abysmal pregnancies.
 - Had entire family fast on a road trip rather than defile the Sabbath day.
 - Avoided travelling on Sunday when possible, but generally fasted on Sunday during my trips so I wouldn’t need to buy anything.
 - Never drank caffeine (or any other prohibited substance)
 - Never watched TV on Sunday. Never watched a Super Bowl.

Some of these seem pretty pharisaical to me now. But I did these from a sincere desire to strengthen my testimony and do the right thing in order to access the powers of heaven to bless others and to generally live in the best way I knew how. Now that I’ve left, family members have criticized me for taking the Gospel *too seriously*, but I do not think my actions are inconsistent with the messages taught in lesson manuals, church literature, and General Conference—if anything I felt like I was perpetually falling short so I should humbly continue to improve and become *more* dedicated.

⁹Many of the issues that piled up for me revolved around actively trying to *harmonize* the Gospel with the scientific record (e.g., evolution, no death before the fall, the Garden of Eden in Missouri, a global flood, etc.). In addition, three exceptional individuals I associated with during my time at BYU exposed me to alternative models and perspectives:

1. A close neighbor was one of the founders of rationalfaiths.com and shared with me many of his issues with the Church.
2. An extremely bright colleague at BYU shared with me his doubts about the historicity of the Book of Mormon.
3. Another extremely bright grad student I associated with followed generally after [Denver Snuffer](#), claimed to have spoken face-to-face with the Savior (like Snuffer), and was confident the Church was in apostasy.

I had many discussions with these individuals, but through it I maintained my belief in the truthfulness of the Gospel and defended the Church’s position (invoking much nuance and drawing upon my years of studying the apologetic literature). Still, I was certainly exposed to more issues and ways of thinking about the data. And, more importantly, each of these individuals defied my expectations of someone who had lost their testimony. None of these individuals were at all lazy and each was earnestly striving to do what they thought was best. Directly and indirectly it became clear that none of them had a “porn problem”, as is often assumed about those who lose their testimony.

recommend (and hence testimony) it was fairly easy to downplay these concerns in my mind while I was at BYU.

After leaving BYU¹⁰ I no longer felt that it was imperative that I defend the Church's position. Rather, I could freely investigate all the issues that had been bothering me, and I could do so in an unbiased¹¹ and scientifically rigorous fashion.¹² I also felt confident with my spiritual foundation, internal motivations, and general behavior to know that I was not seeking to justify any sinful behavior. Finally, my experience in science and apologetics had taught me the importance of examining the primary data myself and not relying on the interpretations of others. So, I dug into it—but unlike during my years as an apologist, I examined *all* the evidence and *all* the interpretations.

After carefully examining alternative models for the Church's foundational truth claims, I decided that alternative models fit the data *much* better than the LDS

My neighbor was a very generous, thoughtful person and excellent father. My colleague was extremely dedicated to Christ and was not “worldly” at all (he read religious texts for enjoyment and was very dedicated to studying and performing spiritually focused classical music). The grad student read the scriptures more vigorously than anyone else I had ever met and was seriously dedicated to his spiritual journey (for instance, we had several discussions about the merits of a 40 day fast which he was on the verge of undertaking).

¹⁰I was a Professor at BYU for a number of years. I left BYU because I sensed that it wasn't going to be the kind of future I wanted (i.e., I could see that funding levels and job satisfaction were directly correlated as a professor at BYU and my funding level was not great). I loved my department and all facets of the job (although the cumulative stress level was very high). I left on great terms with everyone there and was told by the chair that I would have received my next advancement had I not left—and he wanted me to stay. I had great teaching scores (very high on spiritually strengthening in particular—even for science classes) and an exceptional publication record.

¹¹According to Hugh B. Brown in General Conference, 1962:

The honest investigator must be prepared to follow wherever the search of truth may lead. Truth is often found in the most unexpected places. He must, with fearless and open mind ‘insist that facts are far more important than any cherished, mistaken beliefs.’

¹²The instrumentation we used in our scientific work was the best available at certain kinds of measurements (e.g., trying to quantify the amount and type of every protein in a collection of cells), but we were studying phenomena that had never been comprehensively studied before. Hence, we were frequently tasked with trying to decide how reliable our measurements were but where it was not immediately obvious how that could be done. I think that many of these ideas about estimating or bounding certainty in circumstances where the certainty is not immediately obvious apply directly to models attempting to explain the foundational truth-claims of the Church.

narratives (either official¹³ or apologetic¹⁴). In my opinion, the fit is remarkable even using only the data that is generally accepted / acknowledged by LDS apologists.¹⁵

My wife and I worked through this analysis and its consequences together (we read a lot and took many long walks together talking through the data and arguments). Spiritually, this change in perspective felt to us more like a natural outgrowth of a positive spiritual and life trajectory, hence terms like “faith-crisis” and “faith-transition” don’t do a great job of capturing the contours of this experience for us.

¹³Many apologists already freely admit that the standard Mormon narrative we are taught to believe in Church is difficult to sustain given the data:

- [Richard Bushman](#): “The dominant narrative is not true. It can’t be sustained. So, the Church has to absorb all this new information or it will be on very shaky grounds and that’s what it’s trying to do and it will be a strain for a lot of people, older people especially.”
- [Patrick Mason](#): “I would actually agree with the CES letter’s basic notion, that the Mormonism it is responding to [‘a certain style, tone, and mode of Mormonism that culminated in the highly doctrinaire, no-retreat-no-surrender positions taken by certain church leaders and members especially in the second half of the twentieth century’] is unsustainable.”
- [Grant Hardy](#): “Today, however, it feels like we’re on the defensive. People already know quite a bit about the Church, and with a few clicks of a mouse they can know a lot more, including negative information that was difficult to come by in the 1970s. The story of the Restoration is less clearcut than we had imagined, the sorts of evidences we used to put forward are less persuasive than we had hoped, and troubling issues in Church history have not faded away but instead have been magnified.”

¹⁴Without going into any detail or even examining the merit of apologetic defenses, the key foundational problems with the apologetic defenses of the Church are:

1. Most apologetic narratives were considered heresy just a few short years ago by Church leaders (i.e., before the essays were published). Even now, I think most apologists would likely be asked to stay silent on any given topic in a standard Sunday school class today because their explanations would not be considered “faith-promoting” and would contradict many of the statements of the Brethren still used in lesson manuals today.
2. The apologetic defense requires so much nuance that the potency of the Church’s unique truth claims is diluted (perhaps irreparably). For instance, imagine a missionary discussion where the missionary related [the 1832 account of the First Vision](#), discussed the translation process of the Book of Mormon [as it actually occurred](#), shared their testimony of the Book of Abraham [“catalyzed” from papyri](#), and shared [the complete story of polygamy](#) (including teenage wives, polyandry, hiding it from Emma, and [liberal denials that it was occurring](#)).
3. The very need for apologists to defend the faith runs somewhat counter to a system where God speaks to his chosen prophets to reveal truth and resolve confusion. The whole beauty of the Restoration is that we are supposed to no longer really need cloistered scholars endlessly debating to arrive at or defend the truth—in past times [the prophet asked questions and received direct answers](#) and [God explained the meaning and importance of his own scripture himself](#). So, in one view, the need for an apologetic defense is itself a tacit admission of the failure of modern day prophets to be able to resolve these issues themselves through direct communication with God.

¹⁵I freely acknowledge that a person, given different presuppositions based on their experience and values, may examine the same evidence and arrive at somewhat different conclusions from me. However, I do not believe that a person can carefully examine alternative models and come away thinking that those who decide these alternative models fit the data better are merely lazy, wanting to sin, etc.—the alternative models fit the data extremely well from any perspective, “faithful” or not.

Resignation

After about a year of having decided alternative models fit better and only becoming more confident in that assessment over time, I felt morally obligated to resign from the Church. I finished out tithing season as ward finance clerk, trained a replacement, and then formally resigned from the Church in January 2016.

The Present

Even though this has been a positive experience in general, it's still very challenging to transition from the faith that I held dearly for the vast majority of my life. My wife and I are still working through the various stages of grief.

This transition has also influenced many of my relationships with friends and family.¹⁶ The process of rebuilding those relationships has been quite challenging but has generally gone well.

This time of viewing life from outside the Gospel/Church perspective—which is the only perspective I've ever really known—has been one of the most enlightening phases of my life (similar to the major enlightenment I experienced on my mission). Many things that never quite made sense suddenly have an explanation to my mind, and that's extremely satisfying.¹⁷ And, as far as my own sense of moral obligation goes, I feel confident that [morality transcends religious belief](#) and is still central to living a good life.

At least to this point, I have found that the contours of life and friendship remain mostly the same: life is meaningful as we serve, love, and try to understand one another. We feel good about ourselves as we try to remain humble, to stretch ourselves to do better, and to become more. And life is intrinsically wonderful, especially as we focus on all that is good and the common threads that bind us together on our journey.

¹⁶The Church provides a huge swath of common ground upon which many relationships are built. Hence, it makes sense that the disruption of this common ground (at least in some part) results in the unsettling of many relationships in proportion to the importance of it to the relationship (which is often not appreciated beforehand). In addition, the manner in which a faith transition influences a relationship is highly contingent upon [the mindset of the Church member](#)—those with an individual growth mindset will likely view the change favorably or at least in neutral terms, while those with more of a totalistic mindset will be inclined to sever the relationship to avoid risking loss of testimony due to association. The relationship outcome is, of course, also dependent on the posture/attitude of the person transitioning (e.g., do they present a threat to testimony?).

¹⁷For instance, now that I'm outside the Church, I feel like I better understand [the main motivating mindsets](#) at play in the Church.