



Confessions of a Deconversion Researcher: A Scholar's Journey of Faith

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Why remain when doubt seems reasonable? Faith trusts revelation, finds strength in community, and chooses belief.

There are several stark ironies in my life. First, I grew up in an active Latter-day Saint family in a small farm town in southern Idaho. So, my upbringing was about as conservative as you can imagine. Yet, I got a PhD in psychology, which is about as liberal a field as you can imagine. Second, I'm still an active member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, while I've had numerous family members and friends leave the Church. Yet, I'm the one who is in psychology, arguably the least religious field in academia. Third, I study deconversion, so I know all the reasons people leave religion. Yet, I have little if any motivation to leave myself. Fourth, I'm one of the leading researchers of adolescent religious development in the world, yet I struggle to

raise my own kids in the Church. Fifth, I've been in the field of psychology for two and a half decades as a developmental psychologist, so I should understand growth and change. Yet, I have struggled mightily with my own mental health and relationships. Sixth, I have spoken and written about how to navigate faith crises, yet I am still struggling with my own faith.

All these ironies have led me to ponder "why I stay," as they say. That is, why do I stay in the Church, when many of these ironies seem to point me away from the Church? I would have titled this essay "Why I Stay," since it sounds trendy. Yet the phrase problematically assumes the default position is to leave the Church, so we need justification to stay. This likely comes from the [secular trend](#) in the world, whereby naturalistic explanations carry the day, so people who believe in supernatural phenomena are stuck with the burden of proof. In this case, the idea seems to be that the logical thing for any thoughtful and educated person to do is leave the Church, so anyone who stays and continues to believe needs to justify doing so. As I just said, I am not motivated to leave the Church. But I still feel compelled to ponder the issue and defend my position, given the ironies above. So, at least, I'll reframe it as "here's why I'm not leaving the Church." This at least sets the default as staying and puts the burden of proof, so to speak, on leavers for justifying leaving.

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One reason I have no motivation to leave is that I have adequately applied my heart, head, and hands to my faith journey, as articulated in a [four-part series](#) of essays I wrote previously with my colleague Ed Gantt. These essays are extensive, so I won't repeat what is said there. But they capture a lot of the reasons why I have not left the Church.

One major reason I am not motivated to leave the Church, as pointed out in our essays, is that I focus on primary questions and let go of secondary questions. Elder Corbridge beautifully described this distinction in a [BYU devotional](#). I have studied why people leave religion ([deconversion](#)) for about a decade, so I know all the secondary questions. But I don't spend much time and energy on them. This is largely because of what I describe in my faith journey essays. And part of it is, I have my hands full with the primary questions, which are essentially the pillars of a testimony. Here they are:

1. Is there a God?
2. Is Jesus the Christ?
3. Was Joseph Smith a prophet?
4. Is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints the true church?
5. Is the Book of Mormon the word of God?

Let's start with, is there a God? I really believe there is a God, but I have several barriers that have made it hard for me to feel His presence and love. First, although I grew up in a wonderful family that I love, we aren't the most emotionally intelligent (at least speaking for myself). We learned how to use our heads more than our hearts. Second, I made that worse by getting a PhD and becoming a professor. My career is very focused on logic and observable evidence. Third, I have struggled with my mental health. In a recent study I conducted with my colleagues and students, we showed that spirituality and mental health are bidirectionally linked. That is, it isn't just that spirituality protects people from mental health challenges, but in turn, having such challenges can hinder spirituality. So, I feel my mental illness has made it harder than usual for me to have spiritual experiences. Fourth, it seems like my weakness and sin have often been like an umbrella, blocking me from the rays of light coming down from God. Fifth, more importantly, I have lived with shame as my harmful constant companion. [Shame](#) blocks me from feeling love from myself, others, and God.

Nevertheless, [I still believe](#) in God. Here's why. First, I have had undeniable spiritual experiences manifesting God's existence and love. Here's a recent one. I was struggling and venting on a support GroupMe when a friend challenged me. He told me to pray that I would only hear God's voice, and not my own voice or evil voices. He told me to get a pen and notebook and write at the top, "My beloved son Sam." Then write everything that comes to mind. I followed the instructions. Three hours later, I had almost 14 handwritten pages of personal revelation. Upon reading it, I felt it was an addendum to my patriarchal blessing. It sounded like God's voice. And it addressed all my concerns and questions. Second, "all things denote there is a God" (Alma 30:44). When I go on walks, I marvel at the beauty of God's canvas. Third, there are things in life that are hard to explain relying solely on natural laws, like near-death experiences

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(NDEs). Fourth, I'll take [Pascal's wager](#). That is, I think if believers are wrong, they will be better off after death than the non-believers if they are wrong. Fifth, you can be smart and believe in God, like [C.S. Lewis](#), [Elder Neal A. Maxwell](#), and countless [scholars of faith](#).

Next, is Jesus the Christ? One of my big challenges here is that it is hard, with my modern, Western, scientific mind, to envision having a relationship with someone whom I can't observe with my five senses. Also, the barriers above for me feeling God's presence and love are also barriers to me experiencing the Atonement of Christ. In particular, shame is basically a denial of the Atonement of Christ. Sort of like, I know you paid for my sins, but I prefer to keep them and beat myself with them. In short, even though I really want to believe in Christ, I have struggled in my relationship with Him and in experiencing the healing and enabling powers of His Atonement.

Yet, I love all things Christian. I am a junkie of [The Chosen](#). I'm all in on that personable Jesus! I feel the Spirit so powerfully in many of the most beloved scenes. I'm also obsessed with Christian music, particularly Christian rock. Most of my listening time these days is devoted to Christian music. I feel uplifted and connected to God, Jesus, and the Spirit. Many of the lyrics echo my struggles, triumphs, and the desires of my heart. So, although I struggle in my relationship with Jesus, I seem to yearn for it.

Next, was Joseph Smith a prophet? Most of the issues people have with Joseph Smith probably qualify as secondary questions, so I'm not very interested in those. I'll evaluate him based on his two major contributions, which are restoring the Church and translating the Book of Mormon, discussed further below. If those are legitimate, then he was a prophet.

So, to keep things simple, we'll move on to the next question. Is the Church true? I don't really like phrasing it that way, since most churches contain truth. So, how about is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints the Lord's church today, with the priesthood authority, the ordinances, and the fullness of the gospel? Again, like issues with Joseph Smith, you can fill your shelf with secondary questions about the Church and spend a lifetime in that rabbit hole (such as a myriad of concerns about church history). Here are my main struggles. Are the

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teachings true? See what I mean by primary! I am really struggling to see the gospel coming to fruition in my life. In other words, it seems there are a lot of promised blessings I am struggling to see despite my broken heart, contrite spirit, and diligent effort.

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Despite these struggles, I love the Church and the gospel and hold onto faith and hope that they are true. And my meager but sincere attempts to “Hear Him” seem to be bearing some fruit, as attested by my spiritual experience described earlier. Furthermore, the social sciences data regarding our church is overwhelmingly positive. [One book](#) about youth has a chapter called “Mormon Envy” (a Freudian play on words). The researchers were so blown away by how amazing our youth were compared to most other youth in the U.S., and my colleagues and I at BYU have largely replicated these findings with newer data, better measures, and a larger sample of Latter-day Saint youth. So, with all our flaws, we seem to be doing something [right](#).

Now, for the last question, is the Book of Mormon the word of God? Again, beating a dead horse here, but there are infinite secondary questions about the Book of Mormon, most of which I don’t care much about. The simple fact is that it is hard to explain away. [How did we get it if it isn’t true?](#) The alternative [explanations](#) are unsatisfactory. And how and why is it so powerful if it isn’t true? I personally love reading the Book of Mormon. I appreciate the additional revelations therein and how they help clarify the Bible. As you can see by the plethora of Christian denominations out there, the lack of such clarification leads to much confusion.

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The final reason I am not motivated to leave the Church is that I really want and even need it to be true. First, I want to honor my ancestors. I have Latter-day Saint pioneer heritage on both sides of my family. Maybe this seems like lame conformity, but [I’m not the only one](#) who thinks it’s important. Second, my parents both died of cancer. It is unacceptable that death is the end. Third, as noted earlier, I am stumbling my way through life. My own will and intellect have been good for my career, but have fallen short in other areas of my life, such as my mental health and relationships. I’ve come to

the [end of myself](#) to the point of turning my life over to God and accepting Jesus as my Savior. Fourth, I got to the point of realizing that no amount of observable or rational evidence in mortality will ever give sure answers to any of the questions above. So, as [Elder Renlund](#) encouraged, I decided to be inclined towards faith. I know, critics of the Church will point to [Occam's razor](#). Be careful, it's a double-edged razor. It isn't any simpler believing in evolution as the origin of man than divine creation. It isn't any simpler believing Joseph Smith was insane, or a genius, or a copycat, than believing the Book of Mormon was translated by revelation. It seems that either way we go when answering these primary questions, whether "Yes" or "No," [requires a faith of sorts](#). So, I'll give the benefit of the doubt to the affirmative answers.

About the author

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Sam Hardy has a PhD in developmental psychology and is a professor in the Department of Psychology at Brigham Young University. He studies religious and spiritual development across adolescence and young adulthood, with a focus on deconversion, reconversion, and faith crises.