

Pillars of My Faith

WHAT A PRIVILEGE TO BELIEVE!

By Chauncey C. Riddle

I AM GRATEFUL TO BE A MEMBER OF AND SUPPORTER OF THE Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

One of the reasons why I am so grateful for the opportunity to support this church is because it has no creed. It challenges me to construct for myself out of the scriptures and my own personal revelations an understanding of the universe which will help me to attain important goals in this life. I enjoy this challenge to search for the truth using all of the evidence and intelligence which I can muster. I recognize that my understanding is neither complete nor as yet fully self-consistent. But I rejoice in the process of learning and growing line by line, precept upon precept.

In this paper I intend to explain something of what I believe, the picture of the universe I have fabricated to date, and then explain why I believe these conclusions.

To me, the most important thing in the universe is God. That is simply a matter of definition for me. I call "God" that which is most important in any person's life. If anything is important to a person, then there will be a most important thing, and that thing is that person's god. I see some people who are their own gods, for instance. Every human being of normal intelligence has a god by this definition but most people certainly do not agree as to what God is like. To know what a person's God is, is the most important thing to know about any person, one's self included.

My God has two aspects. I believe first that there are beings in the universe who are fully good; they are perfect, holy, and righteous. These I denominate "gods," with a lowercase "g." But all of these gods are associated in a great family priesthood structure which I call "God" with a capital "G." Each individual god has a specific place in that family priesthood order and fills that place perfectly, being omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect in his or her own right. There is but one God (capital "G") in the universe.

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Not everything in the universe is God. The principal non-God things in the universe are nature and worlds. Nature is God's handiwork and is holy and sacred; holy, because it wholly obeys God, and sacred because it is God's gift. Worlds are chunks of space-time where children of God have been given their agency, which agency those children use to become like or unlike their divine parents to some degree. Nature is the physical setting for worlds, of which there are two kinds. In worlds of the first kind, the children of God contemplate good and evil and choose between them; these are called "probationary worlds" or temporal "time worlds." Worlds of the second kind are "eternal worlds," where those children have made their choice of some degree of good and/or evil and are enjoying the consequences of their choice.

Men and women are the children of God, and are potentially gods themselves. Like their parents, each one is a dual being, a body and a spirit. The body and spirit are inseparable for the parents but separable for the children to facilitate their probation and the maximization of the happiness of each human being. The spirit of a person is composed of heart and mind. The heart is the most important part, the true self, the most private aspect. The heart is the chooser, the decision maker. The mind is the switching center, the understanding which presents choices to the heart, and the controller which implements decisions by giving instructions to the physical tabernacle. The body of a person also has two aspects, strength and might. The strength is the actual physical tabernacle, the house of the spirit, the link between the person and nature and other people. Might is the sphere of influence of the person and is measured by the effect which he or she has upon the world in which he or she resides. Both the body and spirit are matter, material.

When people are given agency in a probationary or temporal world, their essential business is to choose and embody some kind of order. There are four basic kinds of order in the universe. Celestial order is the order of righteousness, which arises out of a love for God and for all other beings. Terrestrial order is the order of correctness, which arises out of respect for truth and for others. Telestial order is the order of selfishness, putting the desires of self above the needs and desires of others. Perdition order is the order of destruction, seeking to destroy all higher order

This probationary world in which we human beings find ourselves is thus a heaven and a hell at the same time, where the celestial, terrestrial, telestial, and perdition systems of order confront each other. It is this confrontation which gives each human being choice. The gift of God is agency, which is the power to enact that which one chooses. Thus each human being is busy implementing some kind of order on this piece of the universe in accordance with his or her own desires. Since there are persons who severally desire each of the alternatives, we see a world which is chaotic and spotty, having no universal order, but only interlocking and conflicting chunks of the celestial, terrestrial, telestial, and perdition options as each person fulfills his or her agency.

To me, the celestial order is the most interesting, though the others are important and must be understood. The celestial is the ideal, that order which one can fully achieve in this world only within his or her heart. Pure hearts yearn also for celestial mind, strength, and might, which they are promised by God for the eternal world where they will dwell hereafter. A pure heart is so wonderful that a person who desires it would give up everything else to obtain it, for it is the most precious and most powerful possession in all eternity.

There are other factors which I believe are consonant with a pure, celestial heart. The most important human skill is to abide one's own conscience, which is to seek and maintain purity of heart under the light of Christ. The most valuable human activity is prayer, by which one seeks and maintains place in the light of Christ. The most valuable human opportunity is work, which is the option to enact within one's stewardship that celestial order to which one is guided by the light of Christ. The most valuable human experience is pain, for pain is the surest index that one is not fully abiding the light of Christ, spiritual pain being even more diagnostic than physical pain. The most important human work is perfecting a godly bond of love with one's spouse, becoming one with him or her and with Christ. The most important means to perfecting that celestial bond with one's spouse is to have and nurture children in the light of Christ. The greatest happiness this world affords comes from creating celestial and terrestrial order in some piece of this world. The greatest joy comes in perfecting the family associations which the New and Everlasting Covenant offers in this existence. The most important power in the world is the power of the Holy Priesthood, which is the power and authority of God.

The key to power in that priesthood is to first seek the light and knowledge of God to perfect one's soul. Then one can use one's human power with maximal efficiency to set in order his or her stewardship. Once this human power is mastered and disciplined, one can shift over to the power of the Holy Priesthood to govern and control the elements. For example, a righteous man knows that he must subdue the earth to fulfill God's commandments. So he works to master the skills and understanding which will enable him to produce crops in abundance from the earth. Having become a master husbandman, producing ample crops for his family and others, he then is in a position to learn how to draw the earth into ample production by speaking to it the words of love in the authority of the priesthood. Sometimes, of

course, the Lord will allow a man to do a work with his priesthood which he has not mastered by temporal means, such as in a healing, but I understand that to be the exception and not the rule.

The key that runs through all these ideas is the centrality of righteousness. God is a God of righteousness. The restored gospel of Jesus Christ is the message as to how to obtain the righteousness of God. The restored Church is the organization of those who have dedicated themselves to fulfilling the Lord's righteousness. The Holy Priesthood is God's power of righteousness which he shares with people as they begin to come to his righteousness. Righteousness in this system has precedence over truth, as important as truth is. A righteous being will receive and profit from having all truth, but all truth in the hands of an unrighteous being would create a monster. Thus, one should seek first the kingdom of God to establish his righteousness, then all other things, including all truth, will be added to him or her.

But what is righteousness? As I understand it, righteousness is what beings must do, given the total universe in which they exist, so to use their agency so that their actions redound to the maximum eternal benefit for every being whom their actions do actually affect. It should be obvious that to be righteous requires both omniscience and omnipotence, to know what should be done and to have the power to do it. Thus righteousness is of God, never of man. The person who would set his or her stewardship into any beginning of celestial order must thus renounce his or her own will and do only the will of God through the new and everlasting covenant, as our Savior did.

These beliefs are the frame in which I understand the restored gospel, the restored Church, and the Holy Priesthood. I now turn to the basis on which I have come to believe these things.

I divide my support for my beliefs into two categories, lesser evidence and better evidence. Lesser evidence is that which comes through the flesh. Better evidence comes through the spirit.

The first lesser evidence is the testimony of other human beings. The witnesses of my parents, relatives, and friends were the beginnings of my beliefs. It was they who pointed me to belief and gave me my initial framework of ideas. As I grew older, the testimony, example, and teachings of ward members, quorum advisors, and some very special bishops and stake presidents were impressive. These were people whom I knew in daily life. I saw them in many situations and could see for myself that they were intelligent, honest, capable people. I remember as if yesterday sitting close to the stand and hearing my stake president bear witness of the love and mission of Jesus Christ. That meant something to me, for I had watched him and had been the recipient of his personal concern already in my youth. These witnesses sank deep into my soul. As yet I did not know; I only believed, and that in a tentative, experimental sort of way.

Then I began to get into the scriptures themselves and began to piece together LDS theology for myself. I first read the Book of Mormon completely through at age sixteen, but did not understand much of the doctrine. College years brought many discuss-

ions with peers, and I began to propound and defend my construction of the restored gospel. This process led me to see the strength of the gospel. It did have answers. It did hang together. There was a fine correlation between the works of ancient and modern scripture. Thus my mind began to be satisfied that the gospel was something worthy of and fruitful in rational investigation. As apparent contradictions melted before better understanding and as the range and beauty of the concepts came into my view, I was impressed. My belief was strengthened.

There was a strong pragmatic element to my beliefs. It didn't take much intelligence to see that those who kept Church standards were better off. Those who were active and sincere were special people, accomplishers, doers, successors. I especially noticed the young people who were a year or two ahead of me. Some were casual about the gospel, and although they were talented, their labors seemed only to aggrandize themselves. Others who were gospel oriented were such a benefit to everyone that it was always a delight to be in their company and to see their good works. As yet, I had only belief; but that belief was getting stronger.

Then I went away to graduate school, where I was challenged severely. One professor warned his students that any who had religious beliefs and wanted to keep them had better get out of his class, because he intended to shred their beliefs; he proceeded to do so with great skill. Another warned me that people who believed such works as the Bible and the Book of Mormon were not fit to be in graduate school. The result of all this was that I was sent scurrying to find support for my beliefs. A frantic inventory revealed that my store contained only circumstantial evidence; I didn't really know. I realized that I needed a rock to stand on, and that rock could only be personal revelation.

I felt I had received some revelation before. However, I saw that random revelation was not sufficient. To be a rock, a bastion of surety, revelation must be something on which one can count and receive in every occasion of real need. I began to seek for it actively. I prayed, I fasted, I lived the gospel as best I knew. I was faithful in my church duties. I tried to live up to every scruple which my conscience enjoined upon me. And dependable revelation did come. Intermittently, haltingly at first, then steadily, over some years it finally came to be a mighty stream of experience. I came to know that any time of day or night, in any circumstance, for any real need, I could get help. That help came in the form of feelings of encouragement when things seemed hopeless. It came in ideas to unravel puzzles that blocked my accomplishment. It came in priesthood blessings which were fully realized. It came in whisperings of prophecy which were fulfilled. It came in support and even anticipation of what the General Authorities of the Church would say and do in general conference. It came in the gifts of the Spirit, as the wonders of eternity were opened to the eyes of my understanding. That stream of spiritual experience is today for me a river of living water that nourishes my soul in every situation. It is the most important factor of my life. If it were taken away, all that I have and am would be dust and ashes. It is the basis of my love, life, understanding, hope, and progress. My only regret is that though this river is so wonderful, I have not been able to take full advantage of it as yet. My life does not

yet conform to all that I know. But now I do know; I do not just believe.

This river of revelation is the better evidence which I mentioned. The testimony of others, rational correlations, pragmatic justifications are all lesser evidence. But personal revelation, that enduring, dependable river of personal experience with my God in prayer and obedience, that is better evidence, even a rock, even sure knowledge. But there is one piece of lesser evidence worthy of special mention. That is the Book of Mormon.

The Book of Mormon has a unique place in my life and thought. I first read *at* it at age eight; I then felt its spiritual power, though I did not understand nor much appreciate the divinity and importance of that witness. Over the years I have read the book through some forty to fifty times, and I consult it constantly. That familiarity has brought me a special appreciation of the book. The constant divine witness that accompanies experience with it is better evidence. However, the lesser evidence of the book is massive. The strength and lucidness of the doctrine, the clarity of its instruction for living the gospel, the internal consistency of the story line, all add to a monumental, overwhelming mass of lesser evidence. I believe the day will come when the lesser evidence has so accumulated that anyone in the world will be able to see that the Book of Mormon is a true document, all that Joseph Smith said it was. I also believe that it will be too late then to repent. But even today the evidence is massive, impressive. The faith of Latter-day Saints does not stand on documents or on flesh and blood. It stands on the rock of revelation, on that river of living daily experience with God as one serves him. Yet the lesser evidence is helpful and satisfying. It leads one to perform the experiments of sacrifice which do bring the better evidence, the sure knowledge. The Book of Mormon is especially helpful as a catalyst to help seekers receive better evidence, the sure knowledge.

Although human authority, reason, pragmatic justification, and empirical evidence are lesser, while personal experience with God is the greater, the better evidence, I am grateful to be the possessor of both and to know that the restored gospel of Jesus Christ is true, that this is his restored Church, and that there is godly power in the priesthood authority of this kingdom. One thing further remains: To point out the place and relationship of the lesser evidence as related to the better, the sure rock.

Lesser evidence cannot give one sure knowledge of the truthfulness of the restored gospel. Lesser evidence is sand. Sand is not useless, for often it is our only basis for approaching and gaining the rock. But what if there is a problem with the rock itself? How are we to be sure that we have the true rock? There is a counterfeit rock, for Satan also gives revelation, that very satisfying revelation that pleases the carnal mind. How can we be sure that we have the rock, the true rock, and not its counterfeit?

The answer is that we must use the lesser evidence: human authority, reason, empirical evidence, and pragmatic justification to certify the rock itself. If a person has not learned to be wise in judging human authority, in rationally analyzing evidence for completeness and consistency, in carefully observing empirical

data, in judging the worth of circumstantial and pragmatic evidence related to the physical things of this world then one is not in an admirable position to judge between God and Satan. The developing and proving ground for those powers that bring one to strength in lesser evidence is the work of this earth, subduing the earth. If you find a person well skilled in subduing this earth, in providing food, clothing, and shelter from nature, then you find a person who has learned to learn from others, who can reason, who can evaluate empirical evidence, who can capitalize on pragmatic correlations. Such a one, developed in judging the things of this earth, is also well developed to judge the things of God for the earth is the handiwork of God. It is made by him, for us, and all things temporal are in the pattern of things spiritual. Men and women who are wise about earthly things have a head start in being wise about heavenly things if they will take the same care to gather and evaluate the evidence that they have used in the physical sphere.

You may have noted that I restricted my praise for development of skill in lesser evidence to the sphere of subduing the earth (or nature); I deliberately did not include success in the world as a base for judging the things of God. This world is a fallen place where Satan controls much of what goes on. It is possible for a person to have success in this world and not to have learned judgment in the evaluation of lesser evidence. Success in this world is as much a social as a physical thing. It is sometimes possible to attain worldly success using the tools of Satan, such as lying, priestcraft, monopoly, bribery, deceit, and raw power. Nature resists the tools of Satan and yields only to the intelligent use of man's strength. Those who are successful in this world *may* have gained those skills which enable them to evaluate evidence, but then again they may not have. It is thus often the humble laborer who senses the divine gift of God ahead of the wealthy and successful man or woman of the world.

In conclusion, I emphasize that I have been sharing my beliefs and my basis for knowing the truth of the restored gospel. If your beliefs and basis for testimony differ from mine, that is only to be expected. I believe that no one can build on another's foundation, that we all must be true to our own experience and evidence. This means that initially we will not see eye to eye.

But if we eventually reach the same conclusion from our several bases, and each know from different life histories that the restored gospel is true, that gospel will then tend to bring us into a unity and commonality of experience, both temporal and spiritual. That unity and commonality of experience will then bring us to see eye to eye, each building from the rock up rather than attempting to mold and force each other's thoughts after the manner of this world.

When we do see eye to eye, it will be, I believe, because we are all thoroughly converted to the restored gospel, to the restored Church, to the Savior of all mankind. That conversion is not simply an objective, detached, mental assent to overwhelming evidence. Conversion is of heart, first and foremost, and hearts are easiest to convert when they hunger and thirst after righteousness. Con-

version of the heart proceeds apace with conversion of the mind, as heart and mind lead and complement one another. Conversion is also of strength; the body will follow the heart and mind, creating a visibly new person, a tower of good deeds and examples. This means that the person's might their stewardships will also be converted and begin to show forth the love of God, to become a witness to his grace and goodness.

All of this shows you why I gratefully assert that the restored gospel, Church and priesthood are true, for I know that they represent the true and living God. This leads me to see that the most important and most powerful sentence in existence is the following instruction from the true and living God: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy might, mind, and strength; and in the name of Jesus Christ shalt thou serve him" (D&C 59:5).

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