



# CROSSING *the* DIVIDE

*from Baptist to Latter-day Saint*

BRYAN READY

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# Chapter 1

## Beginnings

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JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD. HE WAS BORN OF THE VIRGIN MARY IN Bethlehem. He died on the Cross outside of Jerusalem. He arose from the grave. I cannot remember a time when I did not know those truths. My mother made sure I knew about Jesus. She taught me how to pray, and that God would answer my prayers. We did not attend church regularly. We went sporadically through the year but always on Christmas and Easter. In the summer months, I attended more Vacation Bible Schools than I could count.

I was born in October 1968 in Alton, Illinois (Alton is part of the greater St. Louis, Missouri metropolitan area). I grew up in Alton and neighboring Godfrey, Illinois. I had a very idyllic childhood. I grew up in a neighborhood surrounded by woods. My friends and I would roam all over the place when we weren't in school. We just had to stay in range of our mother's voice and come running when she called. It was a great time to grow up.

Music was always part of my life. I remember singing in public when I was six years old. I loved to sing, and I loved good harmony. The Osmond family excelled at both. They were extremely popular with my friends and me in the mid-1970s. The first 33-rpm record I bought was an Osmond record. I remember it had this weird looking record label, "Kolob Records." It appeared to have a reference to some scripture included with it, though I could never find it in the Bible. Over the next few years, I would continue to buy Osmond records. In 1976, the Donny and Marie Show premiered and I would watch it

every Friday night. I even joined their fan club. One year, their annual fan club mailing included a pamphlet entitled "This We Believe." It was the first time I remember seeing the names "Mormon," "Book of Mormon," and "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." My mother let me read the pamphlet, and then she put it away. Apparently, there was something really weird about those folks.

Like many non-Latter-day Saints, my mother had heard about the "strange" things Latter-day Saints believed, and that they weren't "true" Christians. Some of her friends cautioned her about letting me listen to the Osmonds. But she appreciated their talent and their wholesome ways which contrasted with so much of the rest of pop music. So, she continued to buy me Osmond records and take me to their concerts when they performed nearby at the Mississippi River Festival or Illinois State Fair.

One year my parents decided to take a huge family vacation out west. We were going to visit the Rocky Mountains and Yellowstone, and on the way, we would stop in Utah and tour the Osmond Family Studios. It was so cool. We actually caught a brief glimpse of Donny & Marie in the studio. I still remember how tired they looked.

We spent the night in Salt Lake City. The next morning, we drove out to see the Great Salt Lake and then came back to tour Temple Square. I still remember walking up the ramp in the North Visitors Center to see the Christus statue. I remember seeing the temple lit up at night. And I remember my mother buying a Book of Mormon for a dollar at the visitors' center. It had a light blue cover with an angel blowing a trumpet on the front.

When we came home, my mother put that Book of Mormon on her bookshelf. I was continually drawn to this book. I don't know if it was the blue cover in contrast to the dark covers of the other books on the shelf, but every time I looked at the bookshelf, that book stood out to me. I would take it off the shelf and thumb its pages. I tried to read it but couldn't understand it. So, I just looked at the pictures and put it back on the shelf. Weeks, sometimes months, would pass and it would catch my eye again. This happened repeatedly until I received my own copy of the Book of Mormon later in high school.

A year after the family vacation, the Osmonds presented a fireside in nearby St. Louis, Missouri. In the fall of 1979, a Latter-day Saint friend invited my mother and me to attend the fireside featuring the Osmond family and baseball player Harmon Killebrew. I remember sitting about halfway back in the cultural hall listening to the Osmonds bear their testimonies. They talked about their faith in Jesus Christ, their belief in the restored gospel and the miracles that they had experienced. I was as impressed as a ten-year-old could be. I remember on the car ride home I was sitting in the back seat. I turned to my mother and said, "Mom, I want to be a Mormon." She responded, "We'll talk about this when we get home."

When we got home, there wasn't much discussion. The answer was, "No!" Mom didn't stop there. She contacted her brother who was a Presbyterian minister. He had a colleague, Rev. Wesley P. Walters, who had done a great deal of research into the early history of the Restoration and had published several articles critical of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Rev. Walters sent my mother some of those articles along with other pamphlets. Mom made me read a few of them to reinforce her "No!" We both thought that would be the end of my interest in the restored gospel.

The next summer my parents decided to get away for the weekend and take a trip up to Nauvoo, Illinois. They had heard about the restoration project going on up there and thought it would be a nice place for a quick getaway. We first toured the Joseph Smith properties run by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now known as the Community of Christ). We toured the Homestead and the Mansion House. The Red Brick Store hadn't been rebuilt yet. I remember getting a drink out of Homestead's well, which at that time had a water fountain attached to it. I remember the smell of the beeswax candles they were making in the summer kitchen.

We then toured the properties owned by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I remember going to the blacksmith shop. We watched them make a horseshoe and got a prairie diamond ring. We went to the Scovil bakery and got a gingersnap. We took the horse-drawn carriage ride around the town. We also visited the Blue Cheese factory (Nauvoo was famous for its Blue Cheese at the time) and Baxter's Winery (Dad insisted on going to the winery as soon as he sampled the Blue Cheese!). It was obvious that Nauvoo

was a special place. It would become a very special place to me personally and play a significant role in my conversion.

Looking back on it all, I guess you could say that joining The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was all my mother's fault! She introduced me to the Osmonds. She took me to the fireside, to Temple Square, to Nauvoo, and she was the one who bought our first Book of Mormon. I know you didn't want me to join, but let's face it, Mom, you started it.

After the Nauvoo trip, I would not have much interaction with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (other than my random perusals of the Book of Mormon) until later in high school. But in 1983, I would have a significant encounter with Jesus Christ.

## Chapter 2

# Encountering Christ

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I LOVED TO SING! I SANG IN SCHOOL CHORAL PROGRAMS, IN TALENT SHOWS, and in Christmas programs. When those weren't available, I'd sing in my room, pretending to be Elvis or singing with one of the Osmonds.

During my freshman year at Alton (Illinois) High School, I participated in music classes and choir. My music teacher, Ron Kelly, took notice of me and invited me to sing in a church youth choir that he directed. It was a multi-denominational youth choir with well over a hundred kids. I was very reluctant to join at first. Even though I loved to sing, this youth choir was huge, and practices were held about an hour's drive from my home. I grew up as an only child, and though performing didn't bother me, I was pretty shy when it came to hanging around people I didn't know.

My teacher was persistent. He even came out to my house and talked to my mother about the program. My mother felt it would be good for me. She told me that I was going to at least try it out. If I didn't like it, I could quit. But I was going to try it whether I wanted to or not.

I had to fill out a questionnaire to join the choir. One of the questions asked was, "Are you a Christian?" I wrote "yes." My mother told me to change it to "no." I protested. I knew who Jesus was. I believed that He lived. Didn't that make me a Christian? Much to my confusion, my mother insisted I write "no." So, I did.



Practices began on January 7, 1983, at Parker Road Baptist Church, a Southern Baptist church in Florissant, Missouri (a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri). The practices kicked off with a retreat. That night we sang songs, played games, and had Bible study. But the moment that changed my life forever was when the church's pastor spoke to us about Jesus. He shared from scripture how we were all sinners (Romans 3:23), how Jesus suffered and died for our sins (Romans 5:8; John 3:16). He then invited us to place our faith and trust in Jesus Christ and commit our lives to Him (Romans 10:9). He invited us to pray what Evangelicals call "The Sinner's Prayer." It goes something like this—"Father in Heaven, I know that I am a sinner. I believe that Jesus Christ is your Son, that He suffered and died for my sins, and that He paid the price for my sins. I want Him to come into my life. I repent of my sins and commit my life to You. In Jesus's Name, Amen." As I pondered that invitation, it sounded like a reasonable request to me. I knew who Jesus was, and I believed in Him. But I had never committed my life to Him. It felt like the right thing to do. So, I prayed. I don't remember the exact words I used, but I prayed, and my life changed. There were no pillars of light. No theophany. But nonetheless, my life changed that night. I was a new person (2 Corinthians 5:17). This fourteen-year-old boy had his own personal encounter with Jesus Christ. Now, I *was* a Christian.

So, what was the difference? Before, I only had an intellectual understanding of Jesus. I believed that He lived, performed miracles, was crucified, and rose again. But I believed those facts in the same way that I believe that the Pilgrims sailed on the Mayflower, and that Abraham Lincoln was the sixteenth President of the United States. When I prayed, I moved beyond intellectual understanding to personal commitment. I was placing my faith in Christ. I was entering into a relationship with Him. I was making a commitment to follow Him. Intellectual understanding isn't enough to be a Christian. Even the demons "believe" in Jesus (James 2:19). You must exercise faith and make a commitment to Jesus Christ. That is what makes you a Christian.

There is a great story that illustrates this point. It's about a man who was walking a tightrope over Niagara Falls. To the delight of his audience, he made several crossings, one time even pushing a wheelbarrow. He then shouted to the crowd, "Do you believe I can push this wheelbarrow across with a person

in it?” The crowd enthusiastically cheered, “Yes!” “Okay,” said the tightrope walker. “Who wants to get into the wheelbarrow?” Becoming a Christian is getting into the wheelbarrow that Jesus is pushing. You’re putting Him in control of your life.

The following Sunday, a friend of the family was singing in the evening worship service. I asked my mom to take me to the service. We both fell in love with the congregation. The members were so friendly. We began attending the church regularly. We even went to Sunday School!

In time, I realized the significance of the decision I had made, and I knew I needed to be baptized. On Easter Sunday, 1983, my mother and I responded to the pastor’s invitation to join the church, and I asked to be baptized (my mother had previously been baptized in a Southern Baptist church when she was younger).

Before I was to be baptized, I had to meet with the pastor so he could ask me a few questions. He asked if I had committed my life to Jesus Christ and trusted Him as my Lord and Savior. I responded with, “I think so.” He told me that he wanted me to be sure. So, we prayed again. I’m so thankful he did that. Many times thereafter, Satan would come and try to tell me that I didn’t really know what I was doing when I made my initial commitment. But by the time I met with the pastor, we had been attending regularly for four months. I knew exactly what I was doing when I prayed in his study. That reassurance helped me ignore the adversary. The pastor went on to explain that Baptists baptize by immersion because the word “baptize” in the Bible translated to mean “to dip or immerse.” I was going to go all the way under.

I was baptized on April 17, 1983. It was really cold that morning. By the time we got to church it was snowing! (Snow in April in St. Louis, Missouri is not unheard of, but it is rare.) When we arrived, one of the church leaders joked that the heater had broken in the baptistery! As if I weren’t nervous enough! The baptism went well. It was still snowing when we left church. I took that as a sign. I loved snow as a kid. I believed that the Lord allowed it to snow that day. I took it as a sign of a covenant between Him and me. Every time it snows, I’m reminded of that covenant.

We continued to attend church at Parker Road Baptist and I quickly grew in my faith. A friend of mine had a study Bible with a bunch of maps and charts

in the back. It was so cool. I got one for Christmas that year. That study Bible helped me gain a love for the scriptures and a desire to study them.

In time, we felt impressed to start attending another Southern Baptist church a little closer to home, and we transferred our membership to a different congregation. Again, I got involved in the youth and music programs. And I continued to grow in my faith. But soon The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints would cross my path again.

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