# <u>The Crucible of Doubt</u> by Terryl and Fiona Givens

## Chapter 3
## Of Sadducees and Sacraments:
## The Role and Function of the Church

*Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;*
*And hermits are contented with their cells;*
*And students with their pensive citadels;*
*Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,*
*Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,*
*High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,*
*Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:*
*In truth the prison, unto which we doom*
*Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,*
*In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound*
*Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;*
*Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)*
*Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,*
*Should find brief solace there, as I have found.*

-WILLIAM WORDSWORTH[1]

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*Saints are nothing without a community of memory. . . .*

*To be a communion of saint makes saints possible.*[2]

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It has been said that Jesus invented true religion, and man invented churches. That's not exactly right, but it does reflect a critical principle: true religion is a way of life; a church is an institution designed to strengthen people in the exercise of that life. The English historian Thomas Carlyle defined a person's religion as the set of values evident in his or her actions, regardless of what the individual would claim to believe when asked. ("Holiness is right action," more simply.)[3] Our behavior is always oriented around a goal, a set of desires and aspirations, even if we are not always fully aware of them—or willing to own them. "A man's religion is the chief fact with regard to him," said Carlyle. "By religion I do not mean here the church-creed which he

professes, the articles of faith which he will sign. . . . We see men of all kinds of professed creeds attain to almost all degrees of worth or worthlessness under each or any of them. . . . But the thing a man does practically believe (and this is often enough *without* asserting it even to himself, much less to others); the thing a man does practically lay to heart, concerning his vital relations to this mysterious Universe, and his duty and destiny there, that is in all cases the primary thing for him, and creatively determines all the rest. That is his *religion*.

James defined religion more economically: "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, "To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction."[5] It is worth considering what he meant by this, in light of Carlyle's insight. He could have meant that the best religious practice is to serve others. But perhaps more accurately, one could take his words to mean this: a life devoted to serving others reflects the best conceivable set of values. Regardless of what we *say* we believe, such a life *shows* what we believe: that our hearts are attuned to others, that we feel the pain of the vulnerable and seek to relieve it, that we aspire to emulate Christ and His life of selfless service. If that kind of compassion—the active of putting ourselves in the place of the other and seeking *his* or *her* best interest—is the lodestar of our life, then *that* is true religion.

What purpose then does the Church serve? We sometimes want it to be more, and sometimes less, than it is. The Church was not designed like a Swiss Army Knife, with a tool to meet every need, a program to serve every function.[6] We often impose on the Church organization similar expectations, wanting it to fulfill purposes it was never intended to serve. At the same time, we often bridle against the programs, manuals, cultural accretions, and institutional practices that can seem like distractions at best and spiritual impediments at worst. In the first century, the first great controversies in the church in Palestine were rooted in this very dilemma: what parts of the Jewish context and heritage in which Christianity took root properly pertain to the eternal gospel, and which features are expendable, culturally variable, or prophetically fulfilled and no longer essential? In the book of Acts we read of a "great dissension" that broke out on this question, as that small Galilean sect first began it long progress to becoming a global religion. "You are not Christians 'after the manner of Moses,'" some of the old crowd protested, regarding foreign converts. Peter's admonition to his fellow apostles and elders still rings with relevance today: "Now therefore why . . . put a yoke upon the neck of disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?"[7]

In moments of frustration it is easy to imagine a religious life unencumbered by fallible human agents, institutional forms, rules and prohibitions, cultural group-think and expected conformity to norms. As if our natural, default, primal mode were blissful freedom and natural, spontaneous joy—and it is the artificial strictures of institutional religion that get in the way! But religious forms are necessary—just not in the ways we might have conceived.

On the occasion of the Last Supper, and knowing He would not remain in person to shepherd His disciples to eternal life, Jesus instituted a practice to keep them centered and mindful of their faith's core. "This do in remembrance of me," He said in consecrating the symbols of His own

broken and bleeding body, sacrificed on our behalf.[8] Then praying for His disciples, He indicated precisely what His hope was for them in His absence. He prayed for their unity ("that they may be one, even as we are"), their sanctification ("sanctify them through thy truth"), and their perfection ("that they may be made perfect"). Presumably, the symbolism He instituted in the Last Supper was related to what He prayed would be their destiny, the effect it pointed toward. Partaking of the sacrament, mindful of its meaning, was intended to move them towards greater unity with their fellow believers—in similitude of Christ's unity with the Father—growing holiness, and eventual return to the Divine Family. Problems enter into our understanding of the Church when we divorce the first part of Christ's model of true religion, the Lord's Supper, from the second part, the effects it should generate. Clearly, He wanted to suggest that remembering His selflessness and service, His *enacted* and not merely *verbal* expression of love, was the key to perfect oneness of heart. The power to unite, to sanctify, and to perfect, in other words, is rooted in Christ's sacrifice and its emulation by His disciples.

To put this more simply, the purpose for which we go to church should be to reenact, in microcosm, the motivations and objectives that Jesus had in laying down His life for us. By coming together in community, serving and ministering to each other, sacrificing selflessly and loving unfailingly, we grow united, sanctified, and perfected in the family of Christ. As the moral lesson without parallel and the basis of our own salvation and the world's hope, the Atonement fittingly serves as the focal point of our Sunday worship.

Most of us get this, if only vaguely. We know that the main purpose of Sabbath observance is to partake of the Lord's Supper. But we sometimes grow frustrated with all the peripherals. Lessons and talks are to some Mormons what cafeteria food is to teenagers—not just in the way they can be bland and boring, but in the way that they sometimes bring us together in mutual griping rather than mutual edification. But what if we saw lessons and talks as connections to the sacrament rather than as unrelated secondary activities? What if we saw them as opportunities to bear with one another in all our infirmities and ineptitude? What if we saw the mediocre talk, the overbearing counselor, the lesson read straight from the manual, as a lay member's equivalent of the widow's mite? A humble offering, perhaps, but one to be measured in terms of the capacity of the giver rather than in the value received. And if the effort itself is negligible—well, then the gift is the opportunity given us to exercise patience and mercy. If that sounds too idealistic, if we insist on imposing a higher standard on our co-worshippers, if we insist on measuring our worship service in terms of what we "get out of" the meeting, then perhaps we have erred in our understanding of worship.

The first time the word *worship* appears in the King James Version of the Old Testament, it appears with appalling import. "Abide ye here," Abraham tells his servant, while "I and the lad will go yonder and worship."[9] The terrible offering of his son's life is what the Bible's first instance of "worship" portends. In the New Testament, the word *worship* first appears again in conjunction with a costly offering. It is used in reference to the wise men, who "worshipped" the Christ child by "open[ing] their treasures" and "present[ing] unto him gifts."[10] Worship, then, is

about what we are prepared to relinquish—what we give up at personal cost. When, in the Old Testament, King David sins against God, the prophet Gad tells him to offer a sacrifice by way of reconciliation. Hearing of this, a well-intentioned King Araunah offers to ease David's burden by providing both the site for the altar and the sacrificial oxen. David reproves him, asking, how can "I offer burnt offerings unto the Lord my God of that which doth cost me nothing"?[11] Abraham, the wise men, and King David understood that in true worship, we approach the Divine with the desire to offer treasures and gifts, not to seek them.

COMMUNITY

But can we not find a framework for giving of self, for service, in any number of settings? Of course we can. The Church offers a particular kind of community that is irreplaceable and particular vehicles of grace that are indispensable. First, the Church is a community. In the logic of Zion building, Saints build heaven where they find themselves gathered; they do not go in search of the heavenly city—or a more heavenly congregation. Thus, Zion building continues to have precisely determined geographic referents. The shopping around for more satisfying spiritual nourishment has long been a heritage of the Protestant Reformation—so much so that in 1559, the Act of Uniformity required all English people to attend their own parish churches. Today that requirement is little more than a quaint memory of a time before religious association and attendance became products of markets forces. Mormon practice has achieved what the English parliament could not. With the rarest of exceptions, Mormons attend the ward where they find themselves geographically situated. They are perhaps the last Christian church to do so with consistency.

It would be hard to overestimate the impact that physical boundedness has on the shaping of Mormon culture. Like the family into which one is born, wards become the inescapable condition of a Mormon's social and spiritual life. Just as, ironically, siblings forge fiercer bonds of loyalty and love to those with whom they never freely chose to associate, so does the arbitrariness of ward boundaries create a virtual inevitability about the ward's cohesion. Congregations and their bishops do not audition for new adherents' willful association. They are instantaneously designated a new move-in's adoptive family, without the member's right of dissent or appeal.

Although not all family relations are idyllic, most are remarkably strong and a primary source for the individual's identity. Surely that is, in part, a function of the cost individuals pay to make a relationship work. Love is a product of what we put into a relationship. We love our families because of how much we have invested in them, how many times we fought, argued, simmered, and stewed but were forced back to the negotiating table by an unavoidable proximity and by a connection that transcended personal choice. We love that irritating brother and that infuriating sister because we couldn't simply walk away in a moment of frustration. We had to submit to the hard schooling of love because we couldn't transfer to another class with siblings more to our taste. As the German theologian Dietrich Bonhöffer realized, "cheap grace is the

mortal enemy of the church," and one version of cheap grace is "baptism without the discipline of community."[12]

Like Robinson Crusoe on his island, Mormons implicitly recognize that any resources they need to employ for the building of Zion must be found within themselves or their immediate environs, not among more congenial fellow Saints or under the tutelage of more inspiring leaders the next block over. These wards and stakes thus function as laboratories and practicums where we discover that we love God by learning to love each other.

ORDINANCES

Second, the Church is a vehicle of grace. Most humans experience the insufficiency of their own efforts to find peace and holiness. Some find a satisfactory self-sufficiency, and some die in that condition of contentment. But most of us experience, in foxholes, waiting rooms, or lonely nights, our own dark night of the soul. It may be a recognition of our repeated failure to overcome the simplest nagging foibles that cleave to our nature like barnacles on our soul's hull; we may find it in a spirit broken by our impotence in the face of the suffering of those we love. But most of us know what it is to be a branch cut off from the True Vine, to have experienced the prayer of George Herbert that "if goodness leade [me] not, yet wearinesse may tosse [me] to [thy] breast."[13] And if our faith in Jesus Christ has not dimmed completely, we will sense the healing balm offered by His atonement, by our memory that—whatever its ultimate theological or metaphysical significance—Christ's death on the cross was the life-giving enactment of our Lord's perfect love, His choice to suffer with and for us. And the moment most conducive to the memory of that gift—the most perfect portal to its meaning and effect—is when we see His body symbolically broken anew, see His blood ritually offered again, and bow in remembrance. That is the moment, in the presence of that offering, that we make our own sacrifice. There, in true worship, we complete the ritual by offering our most costly gifts—our debilitating predilections and habits. "I will give away all my sins to know thee,"[14] said the Lamanite king. We know these are our most precious possessions, or we would not hold onto them so tenaciously and for so long. The sacrament is the setting and occasion to complete that transaction, the supreme moment of worship—and it cannot be replicated in any personal religion we fashion on our own.

And there is yet a second set of ordinances that constitute the purpose of the Church. In 1636, in the beautiful cathedral in York, the grieving widower Phineas Hodson erected a small brass plaque, expressing his hope "to be re-united with her in bliss who now hears not when he calls."[15] Millions of men and women have lived and died in the fervent hope of reunion with departed family and beloved friends. The temple, for those who believe, is the sacred place where fond hopes find tangible enactment. But why should such formality be required? Why can God not simply reunite all the faithful, or open the doors of heaven to the entire human family?

One possible explanation is that, simply put, those questions misconstrue the nature of heaven. To ask them is, once again, to ask the wrong question. It is to make any number of

assumptions about heaven that a little thought will not bear out. Heaven is not a location where good people are assigned, and salvation is not a simple condition of perfect righteousness. The goal of human striving, according to the New Testament, is the acquisition of eternal life—which may be read to mean, the attainment of the kind of life that God Himself leads and enjoys. And that is not simply an existence defined by His perfect attributes. God is God by virtue of the perfection of the *relationships* He has founded and preserved. He has "set his heart" upon us, "doeth not anything save it be for [our] benefit," weeps over our suffering in sin, and makes it His personal work and glory to bring about our exaltation.[16] Clearly, heaven is a complete immersion—a full engagement and participation in a web of eternal, familial bonds of love and affection.

Here, however, is the surprising implication of that insight. The most perfect man or woman—the one who embodies the most perfect honesty, humility, purity, wisdom, kindness—is not necessarily or therefore in relationship with anyone or any God. As Ryan Davis has argued, perfect compliance with moral law, in other words, does not of itself create the sociability of which heaven consists. Being a good person doesn't of itself put us into meaningful relationship with anyone. That is why, according to Joseph Smith's magnificent vision of the heavenly kingdoms, the honorable men and women of the earth are saved in a kingdom of glory but are not in the Father's presence: not because they do not "deserve" it or qualify for it but because, given the opportunity, they did not create that relationship.[17]

Relationships are constructed out of interactions, reciprocal expressions of love, shared purpose, and mutual commitments. We forge relationships with individuals interpersonally in the world of action, not privately in the chambers of our own conscience or by habits of moral reflection. Acquired attributes of godliness are not themselves constitutive of any relationship. Personal holiness is a *precondition* for living in the presence of a Being who is compared to "devouring fire" and "everlasting burnings."[18] But holiness does not itself constitute a relationship with that Being. Personal gestures of love and devotion, obedience born of fondness and friendship, do. In earthly domains, as in heavenly kingdoms, we create meaningful bonds and connections by what we specifically do with, for, and at the behest of the other.

The complaint that ordinances of salvation are arbitrary misses the point. They are arbitrary in order to fulfill their purpose. In C. S. Lewis's masterful retelling of the "Fall," an angel in human form explains to Eve's counterpart why some commandments seem random, capricious. "Where can you taste the joy of obeying," he asks, "unless He bids you do something for which His bidding is the only reason?"[19] In this light and context, the seeming arbitrariness of gospel ordinances become the very ground on which the particularism of a specific, personal relationship with the Divine becomes enacted. Ordinances make possible our response to God's invitation. We are enabled to formalize and constitute a living, dynamic relationship through a set of ritual performances. We willfully and bodily participate in the forging of that relationship as a response to a personal beckoning rather than an impersonal moral imperative. Through baptism, we formally and publicly accept Christ's invitation to be our spiritual Father. We thus

signal our desire to be adopted into His family. Through the endowment, we affirm our commitment to bind ourselves more closely to Him through progressively greater demonstrations of our love and fidelity. And in our own temple sealing, we signify our willingness to expand the intimate association with the Divine, both laterally through marriage and vertically through posterity.

From another angle, what at times could appear empty legalism might in a broader context be seen as an alternative to the well intentioned but disastrous illusion of an ungrounded human autonomy. The ordinances—like the structures of organized religion themselves—provide an unchanging framework giving continuity to our relationship to the Divine. God not only revealed all the ordinances of salvation to Adam, Joseph taught, but intended them "to be the same forever, and set Adam to watch over them [and] reveal them from heaven to man or to send Angels to reveal them" in the event of their loss.[20] Their unvarying employment was the token of a covenant that binds us to premortal conventions we participated in creating; they constitute "the most perfect order and harmony—and their limits and bounds were fixed irrevocably and voluntarily subscribed to."[21] This is why, in Joseph's words, we "have got to be subject to certain rules & principles" established "before the world was."[22]

Wordsworth found that rules of sonnet making do not in fact constrain, but actually make possible, poetic form. Beauty, he found, comes with the exercise of freedom within particular bounds. So might we find in the ordinances an empowerment in our quest to be disciples. In so doing we might feel to say, as Wordsworth concludes, "some Souls . . . who have felt the weight of too much liberty, should find brief solace there, as I have found."

In ancient Israel, the Sadducees were the guardians of the temple, "cherishing the highest regard" for the Lord's house and the things of eternal meaning that transpired therein.[23] Religion without those institutional forms that give us the means to formalize, to concretize, and to strengthen our bonds with each other and with loving Heavenly Parents would be only an alluring promise devoid of substance.

## Notes

1. William Wordsworth, “Nuns fret Not,” in *Poetical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 199.
2. William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Preaching to Strangers* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 75.
3. “The Hospitaler” (David Thewlis), in *Kingdom of Heaven*, dir. Ridley Scott, 2005.
4. Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes and Hero Worship* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1840), 4-5.
5. James 1:27.
6. A useful metaphor, stolen from one of Nathaniel Givens’s blog posts.
7. Acts 15:1, 10.
8. Luke 22:19.
9. Genesis 22:6
10. Matthew 2:11.
11. 2 Samuel 24:24.
12. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Costly Grace,” in *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 43-44.
13. George Herbert, “The Pulley,” in *The Poems of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), 150.
14. Alma 22:18
15. The plaque was translated from the Latin by “Mr T. Young.” The translation is presently on display in the York Minster.
16. Job 34:14; 2 Nephi 26:24; see also Moses 7:28; 1:39.
17. See his “Divine Authority and the Conditions of Salvation,” http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=2324&index=1&keyword=summer%20seminar%20working%20papers%202013.
18. Isaiah 33:14.
19. C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York: Scribner, 1972), 101.
20. Robert B. Thompson, 5 Oct. 1840, in Adrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Orem, Utah: Grandin, 1994), 39.
21. *Times and Seasons* 4 (15 September 1843): 331.
22. Willard Richards, Joseph Smith Diary, 9 October 1843, in Ehat and Cook, eds., *Words*, 254.
23. “Sadducees,” *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), 14:621. The analogy with Mormons is hardly fully apt. Sadducees rejected the Resurrection, angels, and the supernatural in general.