

A CONVERSATION ABOUT MORMONISM

The following is a transcript of a discussion held in Los Angeles in March, 1975. The discussion was organized by Jerry Kaufmann, an investigator of Mormonism from New York. In addition to Kaufmann, participants include Cheryl and Dick Fuller, Brent and Marilyn Rushforth, Maureen Keeler, Bonnie Lewis, Sheila Lauritsen, and Robert Rees.

The discussants include individuals who are either investigating the Church, have left the Church, are thinking of leaving the Church, have come back into the Church, or are active Mormons—both convert and life-long members. This wide spectrum of viewpoints provides for a lively discussion of what the Mormon Church means to different people a hundred and forty-five years after its organization.

Bob: Perhaps it would be good to preface this discussion by explaining how it came about. Jerry Kaufmann came to church one Sunday when he was visiting from New York, was introduced to Brent and me, and sometime later discovered *Dialogue*. In the course of his reading he came across a letter Cheryl had written and we had published in the Spring, 1973 issue of *Dialogue*. It struck a responsive chord in him as it did in me when I first read it. He called Cheryl and invited her and Dick to come to Los Angeles. He then conceived of the idea of having a discussion about Mormonism, recording it and, if it was of any value, publishing it in *Dialogue*.

Jerry: Well, I should like to be a bit more specific about the motivation on my part. For the past three months I've been with Mormons who have been giving me all the reasons why I should come into the Church. Cheryl's letter intrigued me because Cheryl, as a Latter-day Saint, was questioning her own feelings about the Church. Her letter also seemed to suggest that *Dialogue* could be a reason for her to hang in. Interestingly, our positions, at that time, were about mid-way, as two passing elevators going in opposite directions, although I'm not certain as to who was going up or who was going down. I was then spiritually prompted to call Cheryl. We discussed her letter and the possibility of a forum with the editor and some of the staff members of *Dialogue*. Cheryl then agreed to come to Los Angeles. I want to hear what Cheryl has to say, because she might give me some reasons for staying out of the Church. What are your feelings now, Cheryl? Have they changed since you wrote that letter two years ago?

Cheryl: I suspect I have been moving further away, Jerry, and probably as a result of my associations with people who are not in the Church, especially other Christians. For a while I kept thinking, "Oh, I'll stay in. There must be more people like me and somewhere I can fit in too. Maybe the Church will change." But I don't

see that happening and I've begun to feel, "Why should I waste the next fifty years of my life trying to fit into something that isn't feeling comfortable?" And I suppose basic to my position is the fact that I don't have a testimony that Mormonism is the single true way, that it exclusively has the truth and the appropriate organization, or that it is really significant either in its hold on people or in its relationship with people who are not within that select group. So my feeling lately has been, "Why keep trying to fit or hiding who I really am. Why not go someplace where I can be more comfortable?" For a while I felt like inactivity might be the solution, but I'm feeling now that I want a religious involvement in my life, that that's significant for me and for my children. My oldest child is five and the older she gets the more difficult the transition out of the Church into another will be for her if there is going to be one. She is starting to come home from church classes with ideas that disturb me. If she's "reverent" in primary she will get more candy bars than those who aren't. In Sunday School she learns that only if she thinks about Jesus during the Sacrament will He think about her during the rest of the week. She is asking all these questions about where God lives, does he really answer prayers, etc. I feel if I were a good Mormon I could tell her without a doubt what all the answers are. But I can't, and I feel guilty about not filling the parental role the way the Church expects me to.

Bob: The feelings you've expressed are very common, the feeling of estrangement and the feeling that some things in the Church are giving you so much pain, why should you stay, why should you put up with it? It's frustrating to go to Church and try to express how you feel and people don't understand. Your children come home from Primary with ideas that are not compatible with your beliefs, and you ask yourself, "How can the true Church be doing these kinds of things? How can it be the true Church when there seems to be so much wrong with it for me?" That's part of what you're expressing, is it not?

Cheryl: Yes, I think I question the whole "true Church" idea.

Bob: Right, but it begins in the kinds of experiences we've just described. One response is to recognize that the Church is imperfect. It may be the restored Church, but there are many things preached by individuals as gospel and practices put forth as true which are not, and which not only are not true but often drive people away from the truth. I think that being able to understand the difference between the Church and the gospel is an important perspective to have, because the gospel is true and perfect; the Church much less perfect. It is in a way an imperfect vehicle by which the gospel is translated into our lives. One of the most limiting beliefs many Mormons have is that we have an exclusive hold on truth—even that we enjoy a monopoly on it. That feeling of being exclusive and being the chosen ones sometimes leads us into an arrogance that alienates us not only from people outside the Church but also from those in the Church whose own experience belies that belief.

The bishop was just saying the other day that he would probably have more luck going down to Watts and getting some people to come and take care of a Relief Society sister than he would in getting women in the ward to respond to this sister's needs. That suggests that we aren't as charitable as we sometimes present ourselves as being. Accepting that imperfection, and still staying in the Church, is a great challenge. It's a challenge which is not exclusive to the Church; it's true of any in-

stitution to which one belongs or gives allegiance or commitment. The question is whether we can accept the imperfection and try to change it. The challenge of sensitive and perceptive Latter-day Saints is to stay in the Church and change it because it is in some sense as good as we are and we can make it much better than it is. If we are committed to the fact that it can be better it can be a force for good in our lives, and we can be a force for good in it.

Cheryl: Yes, but there are many Mormons who are comfortable the way it is, who like being exclusively right.

Bob: Why abdicate to them? There are millions of Americans who like this country the way it is. Those of us who want it to be better than it is can either leave or stay and make it better. I'm determined not to let those people have their way by not doing anything, by abdicating to them, by saying there are more of them or whatever. We *can* change it.

Jerry: Cheryl, I might have received a flash of conviction when I read your letter. The idea of being able to call you, to feel a kinship with you even though we had never met, and to say, "Come on down and let's all talk about this," is quite remarkable. This kind of positive feeling seems prevalent among Mormons. What other religion can boast that! You're a stranger to me and yet I don't regard you as a stranger, and I think all of us here have the same feeling, and I believe you said that's one of the things you find attractive about Mormonism.

Cheryl: Yes. The feeling of fellowship. I don't deny that it's a super organization, that it works beautifully for a lot of people and has brought happiness to a great many people—including me. What I'm saying is that if it's not working for me now, why stay unhappy with it? Why not get into something that will be more gratifying? Right now I don't see enough in it to want to be there, to participate and say, "I want to be part of it." Too, that testimony thing is always hanging over me.

Bob: You feel excluded in that you don't really have the complete credentials to be a member of the in group. . . . That kind of conviction seems for many people an important ingredient.

Have you ever felt the testimony that we're talking about, that mysterious, elusive thing that somehow marks one as being completely in or not in? Did you ever have that feeling?

Cheryl: I think I did for a year or two, when I was at BYU.

Bob: Dick, how about you? You must have had it, since you were a missionary.

Dick: Basically I went through what Cheryl is going through, four or five years ago. We started out being pretty much in and now we're pretty much out, although I'm further out than she is. I grew up in St. George which is like growing up Catholic in Rome. It was evident very early to me that there were the good guys and the bad guys, the ones that smoked and the ones that didn't, and I was one of the bad guys. But when it came time for a mission I thought, "Well I'm going to prove it to myself one way or another," so I went on a mission. A couple of times I did get to the point where I bore my testimony and afterward I felt like I had really

psyched myself into it and I never felt comfortable about it. I was by all measures a successful missionary—I baptized people, held leadership positions, etc. After I got out of the mission field I still was wavering. I thought, well, I really haven't given it a good chance, so I got into the seminary program. I taught full time seminary for a year in Ogden and still I never saw any . . . I never felt any . . .

Bob: After teaching seminary you still didn't feel that . . . whatever it was that you were expecting to feel?

Dick: I went through what to me was as deep and as soul-searching an experience as I could subject myself to. I remember as a missionary locking myself in the roominghouse bathroom in Winnipeg and trying to pray like President Snow did—all night—and nothing happened. Nothing ever happened. And so I always come back to the thing that I can understand and relate to which is learning and thinking and discussing. As I got into this further I found fewer and fewer people to whom I could talk because I ask questions. It seems like in the Church there's the catechism questions that you can ask and there are answers for them. And then there are the questions that you don't ask because there aren't answers.

Jerry: I think there is a question of spiritual priority. Conviction must come before credentials. The lack of a testimony doesn't preclude the feeling for one, or the knowledge that it could never happen. I think a testimony is felt in the process of honing oneself into a near perfect person—I have the advantage of starting at the bottom. So will the process of my spiritual development be my testimony, or will my testimony (which I haven't as yet received) be the result of this process? But if you, Dick, started with a Mormon package to begin with—early baptism, Primary, a mission, the whole Mormon thing—and then looked for a testimony only because you thought it had to be there or you needed one, then maybe your credentials were greater than your conviction. You can sharpen a knife blade until there's nothing left. So I might have the advantage in starting out spiritually uncut and raw.

Maureen: I think one of the things you have to come to terms with, Dick, is that the Church is much more difficult to deal with than the gospel is. I grew up in a rather typical middleclass marriage-oriented LDS ward, and I married much later than most people. For several years as I lived in this ward I felt persecuted for being single, and looking back on it, I felt that way with good reason. I just didn't fit into the two-by-two Noah's Ark part of the culture. For many years that ward represented the Church to me. As I look back on those years I marvel that I hung in there as long as I did because I was having terrific problems identifying socially with many of the members of that ward. I was not having problems with the gospel but with the Church. As a result of this, when I attended college, most of my close friends were non-Mormons and this included most of the men I dated during those years. It wasn't until I had graduated, moved to Washington, D.C., and started going to Church back there, that I finally came to feel there were many active married and single Mormons I could relate to. I was about 22 or 23 at the time, and in all of those intervening years there were few Mormons along the way with whom I could be close friends. When I finally found there were some people I could relate to easily, it seemed that the face of the Church changed and what had been a mixture of both valuable and painful things suddenly seemed to smooth out. I began to find people who could accept me as I was.

One of the things which helped me work out my social problems with the Church was the recognition that in spite of my discomfort, there was something of great value in the gospel. That was what held me, and it was an important learning experience. For example, it has been really helpful to me to have learned what it was like to be the odd one—the girl who didn't grow up and get married at 19 like every other girl on the block. That feeling of being different and not fitting in, while giving me lots of pain and sorrow, was responsible ultimately for a lot of strength. Having been told for years I was out of step and ought not to be single has enabled me to make many courageous decisions and to follow my own best judgment in many other areas. I think that's not a bad thing to happen to you and I think when you find yourself in an uncomfortable social situation in the Church it's important to believe that it's not necessarily terminal. Does that make sense? (Laughter)

Sheila: Yes, there are things wrong with the Church socially. You can go to church and spend a lot of unhappy time with people you don't relate to, but if in the back of your mind you've made a decision that you want a relationship with God and he cares enough about you, that he's structured some type of pattern for you to follow and that you'll put up with the imperfections to get to a perfect place, it helps you weed out the extraneous.

Bob: I relate very much to what you say, Sheila, in the sense that I have felt that there were people in the Church whose definition of Mormonism did not include me. But I have refused to let them define Mormonism for me. I have experienced some of the things Maureen talks about—pain, and frustration and anger and anguish—some of it as a result of my own immaturity and struggling to find myself in relation to the Church; but I've also felt a deep, abiding joy in the fundamental aspects of the gospel and in what I see as the genius of the Church. I am coming more and more to appreciate these things as a parent. What my daughter Jennifer gets at MIA I could not buy for a million dollars. There are people there who love her, care for her, who teach her concepts about being a person that I value so much that I rejoice in the fact that the Church makes this possible.

When I gather my family for a home evening as the Church has directed me to do, I find it personally rewarding and extremely valuable to me as a father and husband. From a pragmatic point of view I must say that the Church works. But in addition to that conviction I have a spiritual conviction that it's true; it's true in spite of all of the problems, in spite of all of the weaknesses.

That doesn't mean that we go lockstep into the Celestial Kingdom. I think there is much room for individual expression and I think there is much latitude for you, Cheryl, or Maureen, or anyone else to come to terms with the Lord, individually, because that is a private and individual relationship. Communing with the Lord privately or in a sanctuary is one thing, but communing with the Lord in a difficult social situation—like a ward—is another.

I really feel the Church is a discipline, like marriage and having children are disciplines, which can teach us to be like Christ. The Church provides us with an opportunity to be more compassionate, to be more humble, to somehow come to terms with ourself in relation to Christ through other people.

Dick: That reminds me of the saying that you buy shoes that are too small because it feels so good when you take them off. I suppose I've gone through many of the same kinds of things that you're talking about. I spent a lot of time, as I said,

trying to talk myself into the Church and because I wasn't able to get the inner convictions I tended to look at things intellectually, and that is currently my approach to things. I think Mormonism a great system and I would really like to believe it; I mean, I would like to believe that it's the one and only true religion. And if I had to choose right now I would choose that system. I like the idea that people are going to be recognized after they die for what they accomplished; and I like the idea of families continuing, and so on. In truth, I am a very religious person. I want to believe there's a God, that there is a personal God. And so I have tried to do those things that make me feel good about the God I want to believe in; I have tried for years to make it work—going to church, sitting through Sacrament meetings where people . . . you know what I'm talking about . . . where it's just boring and pathetic. And I've been in Sunday School classes where I wanted to say something and I've said it and I've gotten responses that were less than sympathetic. So I have come to the conclusion that for me being a religious person is something that can take place outside of the formal organization of the Church, because even though I am a religious person, I do not find friends, I do not find people I can talk to, I do not find rewarding experiences inside the Mormon Church.

Jerry: Let me give you my point of view Dick. I was attracted to Latter-day Saints—or rather I was converted to the Mormon people—before the gospel, which I'm still working on. I love the people and they're the kind of people I desire to be with. They're the kind of people with whom I want to share a community of love as well as a community of conviction. I believe the Mormons, bound together in their abiding faith, form a kind of spiritual macrocosm, of which I would very much like to be a part. No matter where I am, in Geneva, in Los Angeles, in Manhattan, there are people who call me brother. No matter where you go, there is this kind of kinship and it's this kind of orchestrated effort at spirituality which has become very important in my life. I don't think there are many inspiring externals in the Mormon Church: all the buildings look like conservative synagogues; there is nothing in the way of traditional trappings and accouterments; the music could be more inspiring; and maybe some of the traditions could be better, but it is a young church and the spirituality is borne out of the testimonies of the members—the Saints—rather than through a single minister or priest paid to preach alone in his presbyterial stewardship. In the Mormon Church each member is God's steward. And the rewarding experience in being an elder or steward of God is intensified through the affirmation of a church organization where members feel and share the same testimony.

Dick: Well, Jerry, even though you haven't yet joined the Church, it looks like you've passed me.

Jerry: What do you mean?

Dick: Well, from what you've just said I would say you're further into the Church than I am even though you're still investigating.

Jerry: Is it possible to reinvestigate?

Dick: Sure. My first reaction to what you're saying is that the church you've experienced is probably different from the church that I've had to deal with. When I

was here at UCLA the Institute director had weekly discussion groups very much like this. It was a group where I could say what I felt and where I had friends I could talk to. There have been isolated instances in my life where I've found members of the Church that I could talk to about how I feel. But that has not been my characteristic experience in the Church. In most of the wards I have lived in . . . if I act the way I feel, and if I say what I want to, then there's automatically a barrier that goes up. And I cannot cross that barrier, cannot penetrate it.

If I could talk to people like those in this group I could probably stay in that Church, but that is not the church I have to deal with, and I suspect that that's not the church most of you have met, for the most part.

Bonnie: I think most of the problem is not with the religion. The Mormon philosophy is wonderful; I don't think there's anyone here who would argue about the principles of the religion. But the Church itself varies from ward to ward. One summer we spent a month and a half touring the United States and in that time we visited a lot of wards. It was very interesting to me to see how different they were. In Arizona I got in trouble because my skirt was too short. I had to kneel on the floor to see if it came to my knees and when it didn't they asked me to go home and change, even though I was only a visitor for one Sunday. We visited one ward on a Fast Sunday where they had guards at the drinking fountains to keep you from drinking until church was over.

Bob: In one sense, most of what we say points out that when we talk about most Mormons being narrow-minded or intolerant or whatever we want to say, I think it's important for us to recognize that most people are. I belong to various organizations where I can be much more selective about the kinds of people I work with than I can in the Church.

Brigham Young said the whole purpose of our existence is to see whether or not we can learn to use God's power as God does. And the Church is set up in some sense to give us the opportunity to learn to use God's power as He does. The fact that most Mormons are not doing it is something to which we can all testify. Most of *us* do not use God's power as He does; we don't have the love, the tolerance, the patience, the understanding. But part of the Mormon philosophy which we find so attractive is that we learn to become Godlike by imitating God. And one of the things that God has chosen to do is love all of us.

Jerry: Without running the risk, Bob, of the possibility of schism, do you think that some of the things that Bonnie spoke about can be redressed within the Church?

Bob: To me the most basic, and the most attractive principle of Mormonism is that our lives can change and that the purpose of the gospel is to effect that change. It's to help us so that we can, next year we can look at a person and accept that person and not the length of their dress. That we can work with and accept and love people even though they may differ in their philosophy. For some people it's a challenge to sustain Brother Benson, for other people it's a challenge to sustain Brother Brown. The important thing is to sustain them both. You have to accept the premise that the gospel can change; otherwise, it has no meaning.

Cheryl: Somewhere, someone was talking about reasons for not being in the

Church. I've tried to look at some of the reasons for my wanting to separate myself from the church. My parents may be a reason; maybe I won't feel I'm grown up until I get out, because they're the Church.

Bob: That's really an important recognition.

Cheryl: Like—do I fear commitment? Am I getting out because I don't want to be committed to something? I suppose most of my associations lately have been with people who are humanistically oriented, and I find it very attractive. Maybe I'm afraid of being committed to something, of working at something, especially if I have no support system. You are commitment-oriented as opposed to relating to the Church because it's socially comfortable. My worth as an individual in the Church is based on my testimony—or at least that's how I see it. If I don't have one, if I flounder because I don't have that commitment, and because I'm just dealing with it as a workable social system, then I'm worthless. You talked about God. I suspect the closest I've felt to God in the last six months was when I was in a Methodist service. Their God can accept me—there aren't so many rules. Their God says that's O.K.

Bob: The interesting thing, Cheryl, is when you say the Mormon God can't accept you, I want to know what your concept of Him is. If your understanding of Him is that you're a naughty girl for going and feeling spiritual in a Methodist church or you're bad because you have doubts, or you're worthless because you don't have a testimony, then you believe in a different God than I do. I too in the past several months have had one of the most spiritual experiences I had in a long time in another church. Two weeks ago I went to hear Bach's "St. Matthew's Passion" at the Episcopal Church, and I felt my testimony of Christ renewed and strengthened by that experience. I think God approves of that. I've also had those kinds of experiences in our Church, including one during last Fast and Testimony Meeting. The God people define and believe in is limited to their vision. And when people say God doesn't approve of this and God doesn't like that, I think that it's important for us to realize that that's their understanding of God, and God will not be confined and limited by individual definitions. He is expansive, His love is infinite and He loves you. I think, hearing you both talk, that you are both very sincere people. I don't think it's Dick's fault that he's struggled and tried to get a testimony and doesn't have one. God doesn't say, "It's too bad, you tried but you didn't get one and now you're not one of the elect." No. God understands if you don't have a testimony and he also understands the frustration you've experienced in trying to get one. When Joseph Smith was complaining to God about his difficult and humiliating experience in Liberty Jail, Jesus said, "I've been there, I know what it's like." That's why on the day of judgment or reconciliation with Christ none of us will be able to say, "You don't understand." He will say, "I know; I understand." And that's what he's saying now, "I understand, come unto me."

Maureen: We transfer so many of our own limitations onto the Lord, so many of our hangups, so many of our misconceptions. Somehow that all gets pasted onto God and we all suffer for it.

Brent: Jerry, you asked earlier whether the Church was going to change. I don't think the Church as an organization is going to change radically. But this group

represents change; here we have a St. George dyed-in-the-wool Saint on his way out and a New York Jew on his way in—I mean, that’s change, right!

My response to your question is another question, namely, can *we* change? I take an apocalyptic view of the subject matter we’ve been talking about. By apocalyptic I mean I think it is perhaps the most important subject that we will ever talk about during our mortal lives—how we relate to God and to His Church. It’s one of the central purposes of our coming here, away from His presence. He never told us it would be easy. On the contrary, He seemed to intimate that it would be extremely complex and difficult. Without the direct communication with God which we enjoy through the power of His Spirit, I think faithfulness to the Church would be quite difficult. It simply isn’t a place where we go on Sundays to be comfortable. I’m not comfortable on Sundays. I get up very early. I am a stake mission president, a senior member of the seventies presidency and I do a lot of other things that I would not otherwise do on Sunday and on other days of the week. It’s not a matter of personal convenience or personal comfort; in fact it often runs contrary to personal convenience and comfort. When asked the difference between our church and the other churches, Joseph Smith said that the essential difference is that we have the Holy Ghost. That’s the essence of it. That is not saying that other churches do not have the Holy Ghost, now and again, but without the direct communication with God and apocalyptic spiritual experience this church would be no different from any other. The purpose of the priesthood, home teaching and family home evening and doing all of these things that we do, though often personally inconvenient and sometimes boring, is to try to get us to a place where that cataclysmic event can occur—namely direct communication between us and our Heavenly Father.

Dick: So evidently you have found out, you have had the apocalyptic experience you’ve been talking about.

Brent: Not only have I had one such experience, I have had many. And I can tell you the time, place and circumstances surrounding the first one. It wasn’t the kind of experience I would con myself into, for under the circumstances I would have been an utter fool to have suggested it to myself. I don’t have a moment’s hesitation in saying that that experience was a direct communication with my Heavenly Father.

That’s not to suggest that it’s easier, that my activity in the Church is assured. That’s something that we all have to work out day to day. But that’s where it’s at. And that is not to be duplicated, I am certain, in any other religious organization on an ongoing basis. That’s not to suggest that Methodists cannot feel the Holy Ghost, that’s not to suggest that Episcopalians cannot have a great spiritual experience, but the Holy Ghost is in this Church and it functions through the priesthood authority of this Church. I am convinced of that and I’m sure that you’re sure I’m convinced.

Dick: Therefore that puts you and me on opposite sides of the fence.

Brent: I don’t think it does.

Dick: But if you were to leave the Church after having had such a solid, positive experience, you would be dishonest with yourself. My feeling was, and still is, that I was being forced into being a hypocrite, playing a role that I did not feel inside—that I was not convinced of.

Brent: On one occasion Jesus said to his disciples, "If you want to know if what I'm saying is true, do it and then you'll know." He didn't say how long it would take, and He didn't say it would be easy, but He was suggesting that the surest way to know is to act it out, to pretend if you will. That's not hypocrisy. He was saying, "If you want to know, do it, and then you'll know." I think that promise still pertains.

Dick: You're telling me to play the role, but I have been playing the role the best way I could for almost 18 years now. In the last two or three years I have become tired of playing the role because I have felt like a hypocrite.

Brent: I think the Lord understands that, Dick, but the scriptures don't say, "Play the role for 17 years and at the end of 17 years, you'll know." If it takes your whole life, and it's painful your whole life, but you come to know, the message I get from Jesus and Alma and Joseph Smith is that it's worth it.

Dick: It seems to me you're doing what everyone else in the Church does. You start with a premise that the Church is true and then you quote the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith, you quote Christ—from the Mormon perspective—to confirm your argument. Let me say before we go any further that Christianity and the Mormon position are the same to me. The issue to me is not just Mormonism, but the whole Christian system. I don't have any premise to start with. I have tried to get a premise as I said earlier, but I don't have a premise. So quoting Alma or Christ or the bible or Brigham Young is all the same to me—it's all part of the same thing.

Brent: Then we have to establish whether there is a premise from which we can begin, a starting point for dialogue.

Dick: I have worked down to the point where I believe there is a God. I don't know there is a God—I believe there is.

Jerry: I read somewhere that Brigham Young spent his entire life waiting for a vision that never came. Is that true?

Brent: I've read the same thing.

Jerry: Yes, and it didn't lessen his testimony. I would like to go back to something Cheryl said earlier about being moved deeply during a Methodist church service. I was moved similarly last week in meeting with a Franciscan monk who has since become a close friend of mine. I can't quote Alma or Nephi. I doubt that I can quote Ezekial or parts of the Pentateuch, because to me, at this time, words are not as important as people. I could walk into church and feel something spiritual. My own change has not been within an intramural arena. I mean, one Protestant sect going over to another Protestant sect is one thing, but mine has been a Kierkegaardian leap of Hollywood proportions. (Laughter) And it has only been through people—through divine inspiration of people, not the gospel, that my own feelings for Mormonism grew.

Bob: There's something Brent said that I wanted to comment on. He said that it

might take a long time to get a testimony. On the other hand, there have to be enough rewarding experiences for you to keep trying; there has to be something that holds you while you are waiting for an answer. And at this point there hasn't been for you, Dick. There's still a little bit that's holding Cheryl, but not very much.

The crucial thing about Mormonism is that it requires an ultimate commitment. If it is true then it is worth any effort that we can expend to find out whether it's true or not. The possibility, Dick, that you can have this lovely woman and your children forever, that you can be exalted in our Father's Kingdom—that possibility should provoke you to continue trying to find out if Mormonism is true. You have come to terms with the idea of God. It seems to me there are several positions you can take next. You can say, "I don't want to be bothered, I've arrived at a place where I finally feel peace, it's kind of nice for a change"; or you can consider the idea of God's existence a purely intellectual matter and go on to look at other related ideas intellectually; or you can build on that idea spiritually. I consider myself an intellectual, but I also consider myself a spiritual person. To pursue something strictly intellectually can only lead one to a certain place. This is why I think coming to concrete spiritual terms with this body of truths is important. It's a challenge that Brent and I present continually when we go out and teach the gospel to people.

Cheryl: What you're talking about is the basic issue. If you believe the kernel then you'll do the other stuff because of that. There may be some who never get that experience, but who continue to be faithful and function in the Church. On the other hand, there are others who never get that experience and who don't stay in the Church. One of the difficult issues for me is whether I have to agree with everything the Church says, for example, its stand against the Equal Rights Amendment. What if I support the ERA? How's that going to complicate my life in the Church?

Brent: What you're asking, Cheryl is, "Can I support the ERA and still be a good Mormon?"

Bob: Sure, you can.

Marilyn: Definitely.

Brent: I believe there are only about half a dozen things you have to accept to be a good Latter-day Saint; the rest is a matter of individual choice or opinion. The essential things are our acceptance of the fact that God lives, that Jesus is His son, that Jesus atoned for our sins and was resurrected, that the gospel and the priesthood were restored through the prophet Joseph Smith, and that the prophet at the head of the Church today is God's chosen representative to guide His kingdom on the earth. Almost everything else you can disagree on and still be a good Latter-day Saint. Now, how can you turn down a bargain like that! (Laughter)

Dick: That doesn't necessarily mean you have to go to church.

Bob: I suppose that if you feel spiritually right about not going to church it would be o.k. I knew a bishop who sometimes prescribed inactivity for certain people

because he thought that's what they needed spiritually, to get away from all the activity and everything and somehow re-establish a connection with God. So in certain instances it might be O.K.

Marilyn: We were in Great Britain last summer. We had a delicious month of doing nothing but going to High Masses and Low Masses and hearing great music. After that month I welcomed coming back to the Church. We don't have the magnificent music or the eloquent speakers, but there is that spirit, or whatever it is that makes the Church unique.

There's also a great difference in my life compared to the time I was living outside of the Church, even though I was living among lovely people and living a nice life. I've got to say, and I wasn't sure I'd ever feel this either, that there is a difference now in my life—that spirit, that gospel, whatever it is, does give my life meaning.

It took me a long time to be willing to admit that. Unlike some people, my testimony didn't just come one night, with the sky falling in; it came patiently and slowly, from being in the Church and working in it.

When Brent and I were first married I really fought the idea of a testimony. I kept saying, "I really don't have a testimony, I really don't. Brent has one, he can name the date and the place but I really don't." Finally, I had to be truthful with myself and recognize that I had one, as much as it was hard for me to admit it.

So if it's any interest at all I do believe that testimonies can come in different ways. Perhaps it's harder to keep working for the kind of testimony that hits you right on the spot and then you stand up and know you've got it.

Jerry: I think we tend to make our own divine providence. I was looking for spiritual people and I found them—in New York, in Westwood, in Provo. I found Bob and Brent because I felt I needed their conviction. There's an old Jewish joke—and this may explain Dick's not getting his testimony—about this Jew who was praying incessantly for success in his business. When it didn't come he asked the Lord why, after so much prayer. The Lord responded by saying, "Because you bug me too much." I think, finally, we get the inspiration from other people. I know that my testimony will come out of the testimony of others, and if I find it difficult to believe I'll just have to believe in those who believe.

Dick: The Church is great for a lot of people and a lot of people find exactly what they want there. And this is one reason why I often feel hesitant to tell others how I feel about it—I don't want to ruin it for them. In fact, one of my hesitations about coming down today was that I didn't want to ruin it for you, Jerry. You may very well find a lot of good things in the Church and if you should participate and join that would be great.

For me, however, the Church has been frustrating. And one of the most significant "spiritual experiences" that I've ever had was the point at which I finally could say, "I don't need the Church and I can make that decision." Whether that was wrong or right, I don't know, but I have decided at this point, for now, that I am not going to be active in the Church. After making that decision I felt like what people I brought into the Church told me that they felt when I taught them the gospel, "This is what I have been looking for all my life and it's beautiful." Now, I can look at the Church, sort of objectively, and I'm not constrained by this guilt feeling that there's something wrong with me because I don't have a testimony, because I don't feel what all those other three million people say they feel. So I always felt like an in-

ferior person in the Church, but now all of a sudden the light bulb flashed and I feel like a superior person in my relationship to the Church.

Now I think I can be active on my own terms, if I wanted to, and it would be alright. I think you may come into the Church, Jerry. You may say, "I am joining the Church because of the people and maybe a few other reasons." You would know exactly why you were joining and you would be able to get out of it exactly what you want. And it looks to me like Bob is saying he is getting out of it what he wants—it's meeting his needs—Brent, Marilyn, the rest of you, you're saying that.

Jerry: One of the things that attracts me to the Church is its practicality. For example, I feel there's a lot of good sense in the Word of Wisdom. Joseph Smith is finally being vindicated by the surgeon general—over a hundred years later. But the statistics among the Mormons are most impressive: no social disease; little or no crime; the lowest divorce rate; good health and longevity. There is a kind of amelioration of life that it generates. Coming from New York, I wish that all New Yorkers were Mormons. New York would be a better place to live. (Laughter) So the Mormon doctrine works beautifully!

Bob: Joseph Smith said that a religion which can not save people temporally, cannot hope to save them spiritually—but it has to be both.

Jerry: That is the point, save people temporally, that's it, and that's my big motivation.

Dick: Well, I think you can really find that in the Church.

Jerry: Dick, maybe you need something tragic in your life to motivate you to return.

Brent: Dick, I hear what you say and I certainly entertain it as a possibility that someone can maintain a direct communication with his or her Heavenly Father, without participating in the organization of the Church. I entertain that as a possibility. For myself, I think that it would be difficult, quite frankly, simply because I would get caught up in other things too easily. I think I could just go my own way and let my relationship to my Heavenly Father become a secondary or tertiary matter in my life. It may be possible for other people to do otherwise and to maintain this communication without organized religion, be it organized Mormonism or something else, but I think it's difficult . . . and dangerous.

Dick: I like your point because I have a lot of friends in the Church that have gone through exactly the same thing—around and around again. For the first time in my life I'm able to say to them, like you're saying to me, "I can see that your position is possible, and I can see problems with it." For the first time I've finally been able to say that and say it confidently because I am sure of my own position, sure enough that I am pleased with what it's bringing me, where it's leading. It's a much better position for me than it was when I was always feeling guilty about not being like everybody else. And that's really great, it's really opened up a lot of things and it may lead me back into the Church—on my own terms.

Marilyn: Maybe that's the reason why you could never really get there—you were

fighting it so hard. It would be difficult to achieve peace with the Church and yourself feeling those kind of feelings.

Dick: If I had friends in the Church, even one or two, who could accept me as a person, accept me for what I am and where I am, then I wouldn't mind being the Elders' Quorum President or serving in another position. As long as people knew and could accept me. I love doing the things in the organization, I even like the singing, not because it's good singing, but because of the feeling of everybody standing up and singing together—that's great and I enjoy it. I've been all over the world and I've enjoyed going to church, and even though it was in Dutch or German or whatever, I could relate and that is really really great. If I could have that and not have people, home teachers and others, coming around and checking as to whether I'm paying my tithing or what my attitude is about birth control or whatever, that would be fine. But it isn't. I get kicked out of teaching Sunday school classes because I talk about what I think is happening.

Brent: There is one person who does accept you as a person and for what and where you are, Dick, and that's the Lord. And He accepts and loves you right now. Remember, He helped create a place where we could work out these problems—with fear and trembling at times—and He knew it would be difficult and that we would have tremendous struggles, but He loved us enough to make the ultimate sacrifice to help us make it.

Dick: This is my escape clause. (Laughter) It really is, because the God that I want to believe in and probably do believe in is the God who says He would rather me go through life my own way, making my own decisions, meeting life as it comes and doing my own thing my way, making all the mistakes, than going through life in the Church because I'm too damn scared to get out and stand on my own two feet and say, "I'm sorry, it doesn't work for me."

Bob: Obviously the Lord would rather have you respond through faith and love than through fear and intimidation. And the great thing about Mormon theology is that it gives us first of all a chance to be free and second of all a context in which we can help each other be free. I think what you said and what Brent said suggest that there is some benefit in our relating to each other, in exchanging feelings and thoughts in the contexts of brotherhood and sisterhood, in saying, "Yes, I've felt that too, I've had those kind of doubts, I've had that same kind of problem with the home teachers." If we can continue to talk to each other as we have here today and also continue to talk—and listen—to the Lord, we have a much greater chance of understanding ourselves and each other as we strive for the Kingdom.

Now the script calls for you—Cheryl and Dick—to say, "I believe, I believe, I'm back in." But you know, life goes on. I think we can simply draw this discussion to conclusion by saying that the Lord established a climate in which we could, both by conversing with Him and with each other, learn how to attune ourselves to those forces, those powers within and without, that can help us to get back to Him. If we keep in mind the ultimate reason why we are here then it makes us less concerned about the petty things and the frustrations and helps us to grow back toward Him. It helps me to be able to talk and hear others' ideas, to be able to hear the things that have been expressed here today. I feel grateful that we have the freedom to do this.