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Abstract: *When researching and evaluating historical information, it is easy to come across things that may lead to a crisis of faith. Some of those crises may lead individuals to leave the Church and actively proselytize against it. It is much better when dealing with historical issues to approach them from a standpoint of charity, treating historical figures as we would like to be treated.*

You can view this essay, if you would like, as an extended "Editor's Note," prefatory to the article immediately following. I felt it appropriate to share some personal information with you about the topic of faith crises rooted in historical investigation and what I've come to view as a productive approach to those topics.

I am a convert to the Church, joining with my family shortly before my 12th birthday. That makes me a first-generation member, not knowing anything about the Church before the missionaries knocked on our door. I did not grow up in Utah, nor did I have the opportunity to learn the common, faith-promoting songs and lessons that permeate the atmosphere of Primary.

When I joined the Church, our family lived in southwestern Ohio. I remember taking a state history class in junior high school, not long after joining the Church. In that class there was a textbook chapter about the "Mormons" and the period they were in Kirtland, which was (of course) in the northern end of my state.

In presenting the course material, the teacher told us how Joseph Smith was a scoundrel, and he was tarred and feathered. Even though I had been in the Church only a short time, I knew enough of Joseph to know he wasn't a scoundrel, but the idea that he was tarred and feathered was shocking, upsetting news to me.

How could this be? Perhaps, not having been through Primary, I had not learned of this incident before. Perhaps the school textbook was mistaken. Either way, I was crestfallen at my young age: how could a prophet of God be tarred and feathered? That happened only to bad people, right?

It was my first crisis of faith. It would not be my last. There would be many times through my life when I would be faced with information that didn't fit what I "knew must be." There would be many times when I heard historical information that would not neatly fit into what I thought I understood as a complete picture.

Such experiences are not unique to me; many people have them. Anyone who does any study at all is quite often faced with historical "facts"[1] that can throw us a bit: they can make us question what we know and can shake us as we try to fit them into what we believe. Such occurrences are, by definition, crises of faith. Some are small and inconsequential, while others can be large and devastating.

One for me that became large and devastating was when I was much older. Married and with young children at the time, I was troubled by the historical facts related to polygamy, so I wanted to study more about the topic. The book I chose to read in this endeavor was *Mormon Polygamy: A History*.[2] I devoured the book, and it nearly devoured me. I remember having the nagging question of "If this is all true (what I am reading), then how could Joseph be any kind of a prophet?"

I was in a full-blown crisis of faith. The question was so troubling to me that I found out where the author, Richard Van Wagoner, lived and knocked on his door.[3] I cannot remember if I contacted him beforehand or simply arrived on his doorstep unannounced. Either way, he was gracious enough to invite me into his front room and hear me out. I wasn't there to argue with him; I went simply to ask him the question

1. I put "facts" in scare quotes here because many naïvely assume that historical information is set in stone and that the information can be viewed in only a singular way. Those who study history, though, quickly come to realize that nothing historical is set in stone, and "facts" are continually open to interpretation. The way in which the information is interpreted is more often than not deeply colored by what we believe to be true rather than by a raw recounting of events, places, and dates. This is problematically compounded when one understands that any author writing about history also brings his or her biases and understandings to bear upon how facts are selected, organized, and presented to the reader.

2. Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986).

3. At the time, the author lived in Lehi, Utah, if I am remembering correctly.

previously articulated: "If what you have written is true, then how could Joseph be any kind of a prophet?"

I was seeking to know how someone could maintain faith in the prophetic calling of a man in the light of what seemed to me, at the time, damning evidence. The answer I received from Van Wagoner was, paraphrasing, "I don't know. Everyone has to figure that out for themselves." I thanked him politely and left, still deeply troubled by the evidence I had uncovered through reading the book.

The problem was that I hadn't uncovered anything. Only through further study (and, yes, through prayer and fasting), I realized what I had *really* uncovered was one author's take on history and, specifically, polygamy. In retrospect, though Van Wagoner was a good historian, he had really done a disservice to readers like me; he had essentially thrown us into the deep end of the pool with no swimming instruction and no life preserver.

The metaphorical life preserver (for me, at least) would have been easy enough to provide. You see, when we look at history, we are looking at the lives of real people. These are people who lived, ate, breathed, and loved during the period of history under examination, and those people had to answer the same question I was asking, but it was much more personal for them. I wasn't being asked to enter into plural marriage; I was being asked only to figure out if Joseph was a divinely called prophet. People in the 19th century — in what are called both the Nauvoo and Utah periods of Latter-day Saint history — needed to answer that question *and* also decide if such a determination extended to completely upending how they entered into marital relations.

Therein lies the life preserver: If those people could figure it out, so could I.[4] It was obvious I wasn't going to get that life preserver from Van Wagoner. Perhaps he didn't have it himself, or perhaps he didn't want to share it if he did have it. Either way, I needed to look elsewhere.

That took a lot of work over several years. I had to read everything I could lay my hands on relative to the topic of plural marriage. I even searched out many firsthand sources for myself, spending many hours sifting through information in research libraries. I had to put myself as much as possible in the shoes and lives of the people whose actions I was judging. It was hard work — harder than anything I had ever done in all my years of schooling. But I was able over time to make it through that large, devastating crisis of faith.

4. I understand that not everyone figured it out positively in that period; there were many at the time who left the Church over the issue. But there were many others who did figure it out and discovered ways to still maintain their faith.

Not everyone can do that, of course. In the years since resolving my faith crisis,[5] I've often wondered how my life would have differed had I, after leaving Van Wagoner's living room, determined that I had enough information. What if I had concluded that I didn't need to study anymore and, based on what I had read in that one book, I had jettisoned my faith?

I realize that many have done just that — jettisoned their faith based on an incomplete understanding of historical "facts" they didn't realize were incomplete at the time. I have personally known some people who have done that, and I've read the stories of dozens of others.

Perhaps the penultimate example of such a person is Jeremy Runnells, the author of what, after several years of expansion and permutation, is now known as the *CES Letter*.[6] In it, Jeremy details what he views as damning evidence against the Church — evidence predominantly rooted in what Jeremy discovered in the early months of 2012. Within the course of just over half a year, Jeremy went from what he characterized as being a true believer to a nonbeliever.[7]

In the *CES Letter*, Jeremy throws together well over a hundred historical facts[8] he believes devastate any truth claims the Church may make. He asks over and over again a variation of the same question I formulated after reading *Mormon Polygamy*: "How could Joseph be a prophet if _____ is true?" (You can fill in the blank with any

5. My choice of words here is deliberate: I believe I am the one who resolved my faith crisis because the crisis was mine. Those who look for others to resolve their crises are looking in the wrong place. My crisis was due to how I interpreted information and processed information that didn't comport with what I thought I understood. It was up to me to change how I interpreted it and, if necessary, change my understanding of history. Others could not do that for me — not my wife, not my bishop, not any scholar, and not the institutional Church.

6. The document Runnells originally created was titled *Letter to a CES Director*. It has, since 2013, been enlarged, edited, and released several times. See Jeremy T. Runnells, *CES Letter: My Search for Answers to My Mormon Doubts* (Las Vegas, NV: CES Letter Foundation, 2017), https://cesletter.org.

7. Jeremy states that "in February 2012 [he] experienced an awakening to the LDS Church's truth crisis, which subsequently led to a faith transition that summer." Jeremy's faith crisis and self-described transition out of the faith of his forebears lasted between six and nine months. (See Jeremy Runnells, "About the Author," *CES Letter* website, https://cesletter.org/#about.)

8. Runnells characterizes his catalog of issues as *historical*. After reading a 2012 Reuters news story about people leaving the Church over historical issues, he said he "didn't understand what was going on or why people would leave 'over history.'" This led Runnels to do his own reading about historical issues and led to his faith crisis. Runnells, *CES Letter*, p. 6.

historical tidbit you want to pull from the *CES Letter*; there is a plethora of them from which you can choose.)

I can tell you from personal experience that fully coming to grips with polygamy took a few years. Had I thrown in the towel in the months after reading *Mormon Polygamy*, I would have followed the same faith trajectory as Jeremy — I would have metaphorically drowned because nobody had taught me how to swim in the deep waters of history, and nobody had thrown me a life preserver. It is impossible for anyone to come to grips with the nuances of historical inquiry in an afternoon, a couple of weeks, or a few months.

Let me be very clear here: I am not minimizing Jeremy's faith crisis. How could I? I've been there myself. I do find fault, however, with how he has grown his personal faith crisis into a successful proselytizing ministry[9] that seeks to push other people into the deep end of the pool where they, too, can flail about without a life preserver and metaphorically drown. That, to me, is both a travesty and a tragedy.

It is impossible for me to remove doubt or the crises of faith that believing individuals inevitably face when looking at the historical records. What I can do, however, is share what I believe to be a more productive and positive method of approaching historical issues. In the years since my faith crisis rooted in historical issues, I've continued to study history and have tackled many issues that have surfaced through that study. As a result of the study, I've come up with what I'll call "Wyatt's Maxims for Historical Study." I recount them here only as an example of how I, personally, have come to terms with historical issues.

- Historical records are incomplete; there are always holes. We see through a glass, darkly (1 Corinthians 13:12).
- Any conclusions drawn from historical records are tentative at best and downright wrong at worst.
- Any reporting of imperfect historical records is always filtered through the imperfect lens of an imperfect reporter. This applies to all articles and books I may read about history.
- God works through imperfect people.

9. Runnells now heads the CES Letter Foundation, "a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose mission it is to liberate and empower doubting LDS individuals and mixed-faith marriages," "Donate," *CES Letter* website, https://cesletter.org/#donate. The Charity Navigator profile for the CES Letter Foundation categorizes it as a Christian, religion-related, spiritual development, charitable organization. "CES Letter Foundation," Charity Navigator, https://www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=search.profile&ein=474179614.

- Prophets are categorically imperfect people.
- Relationships — even relationships with God — are inherently messy. How those relationships are reflected in historical records are even messier.
- The ways in which those in earlier times experienced their relationships with God don't dictate how I must experience my relationship with God.
- The ways in which those in earlier times expressed their relationships with God doesn't necessarily correspond with how I might express my relationship with God.
- Historical records cannot confirm or preclude the certitude of divine interaction.
- Historical records are poor substitutes for direct revelation.
- Revelation from God to others is both inconsistent and changing. How such revelation is communicated is by definition secondhand at best.
- Charity should always be granted to others, living or dead.

The older I get and the more I study, the longer this list of maxims tends to grow. (Others may have similar lists, some shorter and some longer.) The crux of the way in which I approach historical issues is that last maxim, the one involving charity. I always try to remember that the past is a foreign country,[10] and I need to exercise charity in evaluating historical issues — there is nothing so cut and dried as we might prefer. In reading through the *CES Letter* several times (and through scores of other publications critical of Church history), I seldom see that requisite charity exhibited.

When looking at history, we have (at best) incomplete recountings of people trying to do the best they could in the circumstances in which they found themselves. We would do well to put ourselves into their shoes as best we can and extend to them the same charity we are wont to claim for ourselves as we go through our lives.

Toward a greater understanding of how to evaluate Church history and, coincidently, to better understand those who would negatively point out our history to us, I chose to publish an essay I first heard presented in 2004. It struck

10. "The Past is a foreign country: They do things differently there." L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p. 17. People in the past (even in the relatively recent past) didn't look, think, or act like we do. We do them a hugely uncharitable disservice if we do not understand this.

me then and still strikes me as a profound approach to dealing with troubling historical issues we may run across; it is worth reading and rereading.

With that in mind, I invite you to enjoy "I Don't Have a Testimony of the History of the Church" by the late Davis Bitton. This essay was first presented at a FAIR Conference,[11] but it subsequently was published in the *FARMS Review*[12] and in *Meridian Magazine*.[13] It is important enough and relevant enough to be brought forward, once again, in the pages of *Interpreter*. It immediately follows.

Allen Wyatt, *an internationally recognized expert in small computer systems, has written more than 60 books explaining different facets of working with computers. He is the president of Sharon Parq Associates, a computer and publishing services company. Before serving with the Interpreter Foundation, Allen served as vice president of FAIR and founding president of the More Good Foundation. He has written articles for the* FARMS Review *and various online venues, including* Meridian Magazine.

11. Davis Bitton, "I Don't Have a Testimony of the History of the Church," *FairMormon* website, https://www.fairmormon.org/conference/august-2004/.

12. Davis Bitton, "I Don't Have a Testimony of the History of the Church," *FARMS Review* 16, no.2 (2004), pp. 337–54, https://publications.mi.byu.edu/publications/review/16/2/S00017–5 176ad2f5804e17Bitton.pdf.

13. Bitton, "I Don't Have a Testimony of the History of the Church," *Meridian Magazine* (blog), August 1, 2013, https://ldsmag.com/article-1–1 3057/.