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A Truly Remarkable Book

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A TRULY REMARKABLE BOOK

Louis Midgley

Review of John Gee, *Saving Faith: How Families Protect, Sustain, And Encourage Faith* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2020). 313 pages.

Abstract: *Saving Faith is a truly excellent book, designed especially for families concerned about their children. It is also a book appropriate for those getting ready to serve as missionaries, or for newly married couples, young couples about to be married, or even for those about to bring children into this world to undergo their mortal probation.*

I must admit that I have had a really difficult time fashioning a review of John Gee's *Saving Faith*.¹ I have tossed out several earlier attempts to address the contents of each of its excellent chapters. When I first began to draft a review, I discovered that I simply could not address all of the excellent content in each of its ten chapters. Even reproducing the book's table of contents would not help. Hence, in this essay I will not try to address the contents of each of the chapters, but I will only give some close attention to one portion of one chapter.

What Is (and Is Not) in This Book

John Gee is the William (Bill) Gay Research Professor in the Department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages at Brigham Young University. Hence, this book is the work of a very able research professor. His employment requires him to do research and publish essays and books, which he has done in Egyptology (the field in which he has his PhD) and in other academic areas he finds challenging and important for preserving and advancing the faith of Latter-day Saints. *Saving Faith* is,

1. John Gee, *Saving Faith: How Families Protect, Sustain, and Encourage Faith* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2020).

I believe, his fourth book, and he has published over a hundred essays and reviews.

In this work, Professor Gee has been able to locate, understand, and master the secular literature on the crucial issues that each of the book's chapters addresses. If I have counted correctly, *Saving Faith* has 1,052 footnotes, and at least half of these draw upon contemporary social science scholarship central to the issues addressed in the book. The reader can be assured that Gee has not manufactured evidence to support a revisionist ideology, which some others seem to have done.²

Saving Faith is not a devotional book composed of stories or sermons. Instead, it is, I must stress, an academic book. Don't confuse it, however, with the stereotype of an academic book — a boring and sometimes pedantic tome that one academic writes for other academics who are often indifferent to what is published. Instead, *Saving Faith* is fully accessible to ordinary Latter-day Saints on each of the topics addressed in its ten chapters. The book's subtitle — *How Families Protect, Sustain, and Encourage Faith* — is a fully accurate indication of what is addressed.

Now for Some of the Actual Contents

There is more information in *Saving Faith* than one can reasonably address in a short review such as this. Nevertheless, Professor Gee brings up some points that should be brought up here.

Saving Faith begins by addressing rumors (rife in some circles) that Latter-day Saint young people are leaving their faith in “droves.” He demonstrates that while, in America, we do “lose some of our youth, certainly more than we would like,” the fact is that, when compared with Roman Catholics and Protestants, “we hold on to more of our youth than anyone else” (p. 22). “There are,” he demonstrates, “a number of things we as a church are doing right, and these things appear when we sift through the data” (p. 22). There are, of course, some very serious dangers, which Gee both identifies and addresses. He shows that apostasy is mostly not the same as conversion to a different faith community, such the Roman Catholic Church, or to one of the various versions of Protestantism.

Chapter Ten contains a summary, or “looking back,” at what keeps young Latter-day Saints and, I believe, older ones as well, solidly faithful. “Most of the reasons why youth leave the Church have to do with either

2. See John Gee, “Conclusions in Search of Evidence,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Scholarship* 34 (2020): 161–78. This is a careful review of Jana Riess, *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

events that disrupt routines (for example, divorce, moving) or behaviors (for example, drugs, drink, sex, or sin), not intellectual issues” (p. 290). “Doubts” it turns out, “generally play a role” in youth leaving the Church of Jesus Christ “only when combined with other factors,” which include “a lack of commitment to and the importance set on the Church in the teenage years by their parents” (p. 290). The “statistically effective factors for individuals to retain their faith are,” Gee demonstrates, “(1) daily prayer, (2) regular scripture reading, (3) weekly Church attendance, and (4) keeping the law of chastity” (p. 290).

“The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” Gee also demonstrates, is “doing a much better job than other religions at keeping our youth in the faith” (p. 289). In addition, those who strive to keep the covenants they have made at baptism “are more active and faithful than in any other religion” (p. 289). Even though we seem to be losing just over thirty percent of our youth — which is, of course, a serious problem, as the author reminds his readers several times — the Church is doing something right.

Later, also in his concluding chapter, under the heading “Faith Worth Saving” (p. 294), Professor Gee asks the question of “what sort of faith saves and is worth saving?” He answers the question by explaining the way we came to have the English word “faith” (pp. 294–96). He begins in the following way: “In English, monosyllabic terms are usually indicative of native Anglo-Saxon vocabulary, while polysyllabic terms are generally loan-words from another language, but the term *faith* is actually a loan-word into English” (pp. 295–96). At this point, in more than a full page, Professor Gee, in a manner that very much reminds me of my dear friend Hugh Nibley, takes his readers through the way our English words “faith” and “faithful” once were, and still are, or at the very least should be, very closely linked with the idea of solemn covenants that Latter-day Saints have made with God.

We need to give youth and young adults reasons to believe rather than reasons not to leave. . . . This is not about changing the Church so that atheist determinists or moral relativists (or followers of whatever wind of doctrine) can feel comfortable coming to church, but about changing ourselves so that we will feel comfortable when we come into the presence of God (see Mormon 9:3–4). This is not about keeping people in the pews but about keeping covenants. Covenants are not something that get in the way of what we are trying to do; they are what we are trying to do. (pp. 296–97)

It is this concept of the centrality of covenants that Gee understands as key to establishing, building, and maintaining faith. Indeed, “the focus on statistics can be a distraction” (p. 296) and should not glaze over the importance of covenants.

Controversy and a Shameful Response

In late 2020, shortly after it was published, *Saving Faith* was pulled from publication by BYU. There was no formal statement as to why the decision was made, but it occurred after a very negative online reaction to statements made by Gee in Chapter 6, “The Ruthless War of Promiscuity.” In summarizing statistical data on the causes of homosexuality, Gee’s words were lifted out of context and twisted by those who felt threatened by his use of data.

Lacking any public statements by the publisher, those who howled at Gee’s statements were able to claim victory — their foe had been vanquished and they, the victors, must be right and Gee must be wrong. One of the howlers triumphantly stated — without providing any supporting evidence — that the book was pulled “because of author John Gee’s statements about homosexuality and child sexual abuse.”³ Gee was obviously evil, and those opposed to him were happy — almost gleeful — to tell us why. The online book-burning was a rousing success, and fun was had by all.

This brings to mind a portion of the preface to *Saving Faith*, where the author anticipates that some of what he will discuss in the book will be controversial, to say the least:

A number of the topics discussed [in this book] are sensitive to various people, usually because of past personal experiences that have been quite painful. With Martius from Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, they say, “I have some wounds upon me, and they smart / To hear themselves rememb’red.” The data lead one “to enlarge the wounds of those who are already wounded, instead of consoling and healing their wounds; and those who have not been wounded, instead of feasting upon the pleasing word of God have daggers placed to pierce their souls and wound their delicate minds” (Jacob 2:9). Others have sensitivities because “the guilty taketh the truth to be hard,

3. Jana Riess, “Controversial Mormon book pulled from publication,” *Religion News Service* (September 8, 2020), <https://religionnews.com/2020/09/08/controversial-mormon-book-pulled-publication-byu-john-gee/>.

for it cutteth them to the very center” (1 Nephi 16:2); we do not like having our pet sins pointed out or poked. Nevertheless, the data are there and just because we do not like what they have to say is not reason in itself to avoid discussing them honestly. It seems to me to be more important to save faith than to save face. (p. xii)

Was the decision to pull Professor Gee’s book from the shelves correct? It is hard to say without understanding why they did so, and they aren’t talking. Some will see their action as capitulation to the howling of those poked by Gee’s words. For this reader, the decision is a shame because it really is “more important to save faith than to save face,” and *Saving Faith* is a great resource toward that end.

Conclusion

Latter-day Saints are, or should be, striving to become genuine Saints — that is, Holy Ones. And thereby genuinely seek to move past our first symbolic rebirth, when we were baptized. Saints must be or seek to become genuinely sanctified. The covenant we made when we were baptized, when we underwent a preliminary symbolic rebirth, and then those covenants we make in a temple, which I believe we renew most every Sabbath Day, hopefully should assist each of us to endure well our own mortal probation. And we should, we are somewhere actually admonished, seek wisdom (and even courage, which is one of the Cardinal Virtues) from the best books. And *Saving Faith* is such a book.

Despite no more copies being printed and despite the seemingly excellent (and intellectually intolerant) work of the “cancel culture” mob, copies of *Saving Faith* can still be found through online booksellers and secondhand stores. It would be well worth your time to procure a copy and consider the well-documented recommendations that Gee provides for how families can protect, sustain, and encourage faith.

Louis Midgley (*PhD, Brown University*) is an emeritus professor of political science at Brigham Young University, where he taught the history of political philosophy, which includes efforts of Christian churchmen and theologians to identify, explain, understand, and cope with the evils in this world. Dr. Midgley has therefore had an abiding interest in both dogmatic and systematic theology and the alternatives to both. His doctoral dissertation was on the religious socialist political ideology of Paul Tillich, a once famous German American Protestant theologian,

most famous for his systematic theology, which is a radical elaboration of classical theism. Dr. Midgley's encounter with the writings of Leo Strauss, an influential Jewish philosopher/intellectual historian drew his attention to the radical challenge posed by what is often called modernity to both the wisdom of Jerusalem, which is grounded on divine revelation, and also the contrasting, competing wisdom of Athens, which was fashioned by unaided human reason. Dr. Midgley has an interest in the ways in which communities of faith have responded to the challenges posed by modernity to faith in God grounded on divine special revelation.

