

# The Missionary

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May 24, 2004

<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

I flicked my cigarette ash unconsciously into the snow beside the hot tub, and leaned into another satisfying burst of nicotine. I knew it was bad for me, but had tried so many times to quit that I finally stopped trying. Even the sickening knowledge that I would be separated from my family on death couldn't do it for me.

"They say the lowest part of Heaven – the Terrestrial Kingdom – is a lot better than Earth anyway and even the thieves and liars will get in there", I had told myself. "I am nowhere near as bad as them, and like it here fine. So I'll be fine there. And I couldn't hack the rules where God himself lives in the Celestial Kingdom, so I wouldn't want to be there anyways. The rest of the family will just have to come down to visit me." The idea of being separated from my family use to terrify me, but you can get used to almost anything if you have to. So eventually I got OK with that.

Bill and Elaine waited for my reply. I was in no rush. Our conversation was satisfying in an upside-down way. Without letting them know it, I was teaching them Mormonism and they had been swallowing most of my ideas whole for over an hour. I was making a lot more sense than I thought was possible with this stuff, and knew a hell of lot more about some parts of the Bible and the ideas that went along with it than either of them. I didn't know what to make of this.

"Well", I started, as Bill eyed me while he downed a long swig of Labatt's Blue, "it doesn't make sense to me that you only get one shot at believing in Jesus. What if you are a wonderful Buddhist. You live a more Christ-like life than almost any Christian, but you don't happen to ever hear of Christ. What kind of a God would send a person like that to hell?"

Bill rolled his eyes. "The Bible makes that pretty clear. You do believe in the Bible, don't you?"

"Toss me another beer please", I said. Bill complied. "Sure I believe in the Bible", I continued. "But, I've heard something about a lot of translation problems, and maybe the guys who decided what was included and what wasn't cut out some of the good stuff just because they didn't agree with it. The Bible seems to have a pretty unreliable history to me."

Bill rolled his eyes again, and Elaine looked deeply troubled. "If you don't believe in the Bible, how do you know what's true and what isn't? You can't even be sure that Jesus died for us, and if you don't believe that, you aren't a Christian." She looked ill, and like maybe she would rather not be in the same hot tub with me.

The others had long since left. Bill was the leader of the group we were skiing with that weekend. He was a funny, guitar playing, great guy who was just enough older than the rest of us to be our natural leader. He was a couple of years into university, and had been the student body president at our high school when he went there. And Elaine and I had been hanging out together for a few months. Only last week we started "going out". She invited me to come with them on this long weekend ski trip, and we were having a blast. I knew a lot of the kids who attended her church – but didn't even know its name.

Bill was the organizer of all the church's youth activities, and was planning to become a pastor. This was the first of his events I had agreed to attend after being invited to several. My experience with Mormonism had left me with no wish to have anything to do with religion, and it worried me when I found out that Elaine – gorgeous and fun though she was – was serious about her church. I thought that at age 17 I was already over my lifetime quota of people who were serious about religion. But there I was in hot tub with Bill and Elaine, in the middle of a serious religious discussion – the first since the last time Mom and Dad had been pleading with me to obey the Mormon rule book, and telling me what would happen to me if I didn't. The perplexing fact that I seemed to be enjoying myself teased my mind again.

"Hold on", I said. "I'm not sure what I believe, but I'm a Christian for sure." Noticeable relief showed on both the faces opposite me in the hot tub.

"I'm just telling you what makes sense to me and what doesn't. For example, it would make sense to me that a God who loves his children would make sure they all had a fair chance to hear about his plan for them, and particularly how Christ died for them and what that means." As I said this, I felt something strange – an elevation of mind; a sense of power. Both Bill and Elaine leaned intently toward me.

"It seems to me", I continued, "that God must be fair enough to treat his children that way. And he told us not to judge, didn't he? So, I think he must have some way of making the whole thing fair – to give us all the same chance. Like, maybe once we die, everyone who didn't have the chance to hear about Jesus and understand how important His message is

will have that chance before they are judged by God. So, that good Buddhist I mentioned wouldn't go to hell. Because if he lived the way Christ taught anyway, he would recognize Christ as his natural leader and would follow him when that chance came. What do you think of that?"

Bill still looked troubled, but less so, and his trade mark, easy-going smile returned. He made religion seem almost cool. "You sure have a funny take on things", he laughed. "I can't say that I have ever thought about that question, and it doesn't bother me one way or the other. I agree that it wouldn't be fair for a good person like your Buddhist to go to hell, but I have enough faith in Jesus that I just don't worry about stuff like that – its just details. All I worry about is doing what Jesus showed me I should do."

He leaned forward toward me and turned serious. "I'll try to reach everyone I can, including your Buddhist, and let them feel Jesus' love through me. If I don't do what I can in that regard, I'll be accountable. Jesus will find a way to be fair with your Buddhist and everyone else. He can't be anything other than fair. In fact, "Bill exulted as though he were discovering something, "it would be against his nature to be unfair, because he is perfectly just!" The easy smile flashed again. "I suggest that you worry more about what you can do and how well you are doing it, and less about all the people you have nothing to do with."

"You don't think its important that that God is fair?", I persisted.

"I know he's fair", replied Bill, "so I don't worry about it."

I kept pushing. "But I thought you said before that anyone who doesn't accept Jesus can't be saved?"

"I guess I did say that and you're making me rethink what I said. I'll have to talk to my pastor about it. But I know Jesus is fair, and so somehow that will work out. Maybe it is as you say. But I know it is important that we tell people about Jesus and what He did for us." Bill fell silent. Elaine looked pleased.

I felt that rush again. It seemed like a minor out of body experience. I butted my almost spent cigarette, and finished the can of Labatt's with a long swallow.

Elaine was smiling again. "So Alan", she said, "have you accepted Jesus?"

"I'm not sure what you mean", I said, still wondering at these feelings that pulsed through me. I recognized them, but they were out of place here in a

beer and nicotine drenched hot tub at a mountain resort miles from any real Mormons. This kind of feeling did not come in a bottle, leaf, powder or pill. I had felt like this only a few times before, and always as a result of my Mormon testimony.

I hated attending church. It was a waste of time, and the people there, including Mom and Dad – especially Mom and Dad – constantly told me what to do without any reason that made sense. It was always just that some dead – or almost dead – guy said we had to do things his way. The whole thing seemed worse than pointless – like carrying a huge weight everywhere you go for the hell of it. So I refused, and fought with Dad a bunch of times over that. Once it got so bad that we had a real fist fight – a knock'em down drag'em out fist fight – over some stupid Scout activity he tried to force me to. But at least the fight made him back off. He didn't ever take me by the ear or back of the neck again.

But then Mom, who I thought was my ally, went ape-shit on me. And one of her friends near ripped me a new asshole. The straw that broke that camel's back was when Mom cried in the middle of church as she heard the sound of my baseball cleats on the linoleum going out the back door when I had a game to play. I almost never went to church unless I had an excuse to leave early. Way too much sitting for me.

"Your Mom does so much to help other people", her friend told me, "it's wrong for you to hurt her the way you do! You should have seen her cry when you walked out of church the other day to play baseball on the Sabbath! Everyone can hear the sound of those baseball shoes of yours!" She was irate. Note to self – "Put your cleats on in the parking lot from now on".

Mom's crying made me ache. But I just couldn't stand to sit and listen to nonsense for hour after hour. And there were so many rules! And so many other things I really want to do; things that make time stop and the gnawing inside I usually feel disappear.

I hated it when I could see how I hurt Mom and Dad, and it was even worse when I saw how the fighting between us upset my little brothers and sisters.

And Grandpa and Grandma! One of the few times when I got really drunk I slept in the next day – hung over bad. They came down to my room, together as always. And Grandma spoke for both of them – as always – while I pretended to be asleep. She gave me a fifteen minute lecture while I laid there. I was disrespecting myself; and God; and my parents who did so much for me; and my pioneer ancestors; and them. And what was my

example going to do to my little brothers and sisters? Then Grandma broke down and cried and called me "big boy" over and over the way she did when I was little and she used to baby sit me. I felt much sicker by the time she was finished. I didn't get out of bed for hours. I couldn't face her, and waited for them to leave before I came upstairs. Grandma has always done everything for me. I'm her first, and favourite, grandchild. She has never admitted that, but I can tell. Grandpa didn't say anything, but he was there. I could feel his disappointment, and his quiet love.

But I hated going to church so much that even all of that was not enough to make me go. Mormon youth activities were, however, different. Even the worst tight asses at church usually loosened up there.

I played basketball and softball with some of the old guys who were among the Church's leaders and sometimes came to our youth activities. I had the feeling that they were mostly trying to butter us up, but when some of them got on the basketball court or baseball diamond, they shifted gears. These guys – I could tell – probably used to be a lot like me. That idea was vaguely terrifying.

A few of these guys, in particular, were surprisingly good for old can't-jump, can't-run, fat, white, bald guys. One of them threw some of the best no-look passes on the basketball court I had ever seen. Two 300-pounders almost killed me once when I got to a rebound first and they tied for second, coming from different directions. Their brakes didn't work that well – surprise, surprise.

And some of our youth leaders were great – athletic; fun to be around; seemed to love us and put up with all kinds of trouble from us. They were young enough that it seemed like they remembered what it was like to be us.

The youth conferences were the toppers. They let us go someplace away from home and do things with Mormon kids from all over. This was an entirely different league. No – it was a different world.

A couple of years ago in '74 I went to a Mormon youth conference on Orcas Island in the Gulf of Juan de Fuca near Victoria, Canada. You were supposed to be "worthy" to be able to go, and I wasn't. But somehow I got in anyway. At the end of the first really fun day, Randy Bachman put on a one man concert in an outdoor amphitheatre on the beach, and then we had a testimony meeting. Randy was Mormon and started the testimony meeting off, which was weird. I have no idea what he said. And I was thinking, "Man, I have got to get out of here as soon as he is finished." I thought it

would be rude to sneak out on him after he had taken the time out of his superstar schedule to come do a concert for us. "Takin Care of Business" was near the top of the charts, and to hear him play it there on the beach was a rush – something I knew my friends at home would think was way cool. So cool that it would explain why I had gone away for precious week of summer vacation with a bunch of religious nut jobs.

So, I was going to listen to Randy and then find a way to get the hell out of there. The bullshit was thicker in Mormon testimony meetings than anywhere I had ever been. But before I could sneak out, this gorgeous girl I had hung out with during the day stood up and started to talk about her family; and how she loved them; and how the Church had helped her through some really rough times; and how she was sure that without it and her friends at church she would be in a terrible place with her life. And then she started to cry. When she did that, I felt a rush that I had never felt before. And it got stronger as she kept crying and told how she had read the Book of Mormon and how it had changed her life; and how she had come to know her Saviour. And then I did the most bizarre thing. My only Mormon-but-normal friend was sitting there looking at me and I could see him thinking, "What the fuck is wrong with you!".

I got up in front of hundreds of people I didn't even know, and said the same stuff that girl had. And as I started to do this, it was like a dam burst inside of me. I felt way more than I had while I was listening to her, and started to cry so hard I couldn't even talk. I had to just stand there like an asshole and try to finally slobber out a few things and then sit down. It was a complete meltdown, particularly when I tried to say how much I loved my Mom and Dad. Mom was there. She was always a leader at that kind of thing, even when none of her kids were involved.

I even said I knew the Book of Mormon was true although I had only read little bits of it. And I really did know that. Those feelings were so strong I couldn't deny them. They had started when I heard that girl talk about what the Book of Mormon had done for her. And that is exactly how the Spirit works – it testifies of truth. I didn't need to read the book myself to know it is true.

And so I choked out, "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is God's one and only true church on the face of the Earth", and "I know that the Book of Mormon is the word of God", and "I know that Joseph Smith restored God's true Church and that all the prophets who came after him are God's prophets" and a whole bunch of other things, just like I've heard Mom and Dad and other people at church say thousands of times.

I couldn't believe my own ears – and couldn't believe what I felt. Those feelings were so strong that they should have scared the hell out of me, but it didn't. And it just kept going! I wanted it to last forever. I had never felt so safe; so sure of myself. I could have flown if I wanted to! Nothing could frighten me while I felt like that!

Before the meeting was over, my "normal" friend had done pretty much the same thing I did. We had a good laugh about that later. Neither of us knew what the fuck had happened. It was a real trip! And I mean real. No denying it. We both said that eventually we would straighten out, and he even said he was going to do it right then. But not me. I had tried so hard to quit smoking already that I knew I couldn't. And as long as I was doing that, there was no point trying to fix the rest of that shit.

Mom cried harder than I did while I was blubbering and trying to bear my testimony. Right after the meeting she found me in the dark as I walked back to my cabin, hugged me and told me that she had been fasting and praying that I would receive my testimony, and was so happy she had seen it with her own eyes. I watched as she walked away and person after person came to her, and hugged her while she continued to cry. I started to cry again then too. The fact that she was happy with me for a change came in handy when I got caught smoking the next night, and was almost sent home early.

President Anderson called me and my buddy into his tent, and asked us point blank, out of nowhere, if we had been smoking. We are sure no one saw us. Before we could stammer out an excuse, he had us. Spooky. I am not sure it was the Spirit that told him what we were doing, but I got a minor spine tingle while we were with him, and so think it probably was. But he was pretty cool. He gave us one more chance, and I gave him my cigarettes. If I kept them, I wouldn't be able to control myself. We still had two days to go, which for me is a long time without a smoke.

I still hated going to church, and tried to go but just couldn't. Maybe if it was like youth conference each week I could do it. But it's not. Not even close. But when people ask me if I have a testimony, I say "Yes". I'm not a liar, and can't deny what I felt. I will never forget those feelings. But they are not enough to make me go to church. Maybe when I'm older things will be different, like it is with those old guys who turn from zombies into animals as soon as they get on the basketball court.

Regardless of my testimony, I'm sure as hell not going on a mission. I couldn't hack walking around knocking on doors and telling total strangers they should believe the way I do. I don't care if that is what God wants me

to do – I can't do it. That's another reason I won't be in the Celestial Kingdom with the rest of my family.

And that rule book the missionaries have to live by for two whole years! It's Mormonism times ten. I read the first few pages once. It's nuts. Right down to how to wipe your ass, and how many times each day to do it. Since I can't quit smoking and am not going to the Celestial Kingdom anyway, why bother with all that other shit? Like beating your head against a wall for no reason whatsoever.

I had that the "testimony" thing three times – each summer at the youth conference – and each time was pretty much the same as the first but not so wild because I knew what was coming. I kind of looked forward to it. Like I said, it is a real trip – we joked about it being an "LDS trip". Unbelievable feelings. But what the hell are these feelings doing here?

"Well," said Elaine, "have you?" Elaine and Bill waited expectantly.

"Sorry", I said. "Have I ...?"

"Accepted Jesus as your personal Saviour – been saved?"

"Right. Sorry. I was just thinking about the first time I did that. Yes, I have. He is my Saviour ..." Those feelings again, and stronger – almost like at Orcas Island. My throat clamped shut, and I could feel my face going red and my vision blurring. I looked down.

Elaine immediately began to cry. Bill beamed.

"I knew it!" He proclaimed. "You have kind of a funny way of looking at things, but I knew you were a Christian the first time we played basketball last fall. You just have that Christian look about you!"

Elaine doused her face a few times in the hot tub, and within a few seconds had started to compose herself and moved over beside me again. By then I had settled down too. Bill slid up onto the deck and into a standing position in one smooth motion and said, "Curfew's in about 15 minutes. I'll see you guys inside?"

"Yeah", we said in unison.

Elaine immediately buried her head in my neck and then kissed me softly. I turned to her and responded, and we held each other in a silence like none I had ever felt. It wasn't like I hadn't kissed and held her before. But this

was different – both how it was to be close to her and what the testimony thing felt like were different. I couldn't tell where my body stopped and her's started, and that seemed like the way it had always been. I didn't know if we had been there minutes or hours. These feelings were staggering. I didn't want to let them, or her, go. Everything seemed possible. There was nothing to fear as long as I felt like this. What a blast!

"I know He's my Saviour", I repeated as I gave Elaine another squeeze and then held her to me. "We'd better get going." I hopped out of the tub and quickly wrapped a towel around my waist to cover my hard-on before turning to take her hand. She beamed at me, dropped my hand, wrapped her arms around my waist and put her head on my shoulder as we walked toward the chalet and the singing we could hear coming from it.

"Maybe", I thought, "I could be a Mormon missionary after all." Then I remembered. "Wait a sec Elaine", I said as I slipped away from her and loped back to the hot tub. I had forgotten my cigarettes.