

INTRODUCTION

*Fanaticism consists in redoubling your effort
when you have forgotten your aim.*

– George Santayana

On the evening of April 17, 1989, all five members of the Dennis Avery family were, one by one, escorted to a barn in Kirtland, Ohio, where they were shot to death and buried in a common grave. They'd been members of a cult. And the farm where they were killed was the home of the *Choice Seer*—a man they, and the others of the group, believed to embody the promises of the Book of Mormon in end-times prophecy. As a member of the group I was involved in their deaths and now serve multiple life sentences for the horrific crimes committed that night. I played the role of the *Judas Goat* leading them from the house to the barn, and to their deaths.

This book attempts to present an account, in my own words, of how this tragedy came to occur. Other books have been written by people unfamiliar with the weightier matters of the group—how it came to be formed, the influences and doctrines that shaped its dynamic, and how this all produced the ugly fruit that is now public record.

I have now been incarcerated for nearly seventeen years. But this book was actually written quite early in my prison experience. I started the book upon entering the Correctional Reception Center, in Columbus, Ohio, but quickly lost momentum after arriving at my parent institution and began adjusting to prison life. Nevertheless, after the deadly 1993 riot at the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility, where I was residing, I acquired a renewed fervor to chronicle this tragic story. The manuscript was completed in the summer of 1994.

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THE GROUP HAD ESSENTIALLY DISBANDED about a month before the arrests. The period was filled with confusion, disenchantment, and a heavy sense of impending doom. But once I entered the County Jail this all began to change—as did my relationship with Jesus Christ.

All my life I thought I had truly loved the Lord. Yet there I sat, unable to understand what had gone wrong and how my desire to serve God had taken me so far astray. For a time it was too painful to even read from the scriptures. My mind kept seeing the aberrant teachings of the cult and reflecting back through all the horror they'd produced.

The Law of Moses had been redefined within the group. Everything we'd done and endured had been performed in obedience to this *law*. When I felt ready to study again I was still unable to use my own books due to the markings and notes compiled through thousands of hours of class-time in the group. The jail chaplain brought me a paperback Good News Bible, which gave me the feeling of a clean slate—a new beginning.

Like a distant memory in the back of my mind, I recalled the simple truth that the law is fulfilled in Christ Jesus. A new desire began to grow in my heart, in the form of a question, *What is that law, which Christ fulfilled?* I took everything I ever thought I had known about God and placed it off to the side. Using only the Bible—with no influence of the Book of Mormon or other doctrines—I sought the answer to this question.

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DURING THE FOLLOWING MONTHS THAT I REMAINED IN THAT CELL I read through the Bible—twice. My little world had come to an end, yet the refreshing waters of God's Word restored my soul. I began to see distinct differences between the Book of Mormon and the genuine Bible message. It was a message I hadn't really known before. The Lord touched the confusion of my mind, healed me and opened my eyes to see what He'd intended for me all along. I finally saw the fulfilling beauty of His Grace. At last, I saw not a "great and marvelous work" yet to be performed; but rather what has *already* been accomplished in our risen Lord.

That's not to say that His precious Truth hasn't been challenged—it has. At the beginning of my incarceration I entered a course in Theology and taught myself a basic level of New Testament Greek. My world was enlarged as I took in the diversity that has existed in the church since its inception: the early and latter heresies and various ways people have viewed the Bible message.

As my reading began to expose the intellectual isolation I'd subjected myself to throughout my life, I found a desire to expand my horizons. Though not at all a scholarly man, incarceration has afforded me the time and incentive to pursue a grasp of history and philosophy, of mythological tales and the fundamentals of the world's religions. At times I waned into agnosticism and even immersed myself into questions and discussions of sheer atheism. My path seemed, at times, to reflect the words of Francis Bacon. "If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts, but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties." It had been in the most erroneous moments of my life that I had been unwaveringly *certain*; and this uncritical certainty had produced shameful history that sought to darken my soul with a finality of *doubt*.

In his book *Further Along the Road Less Traveled* Dr. M. Scott Peck captures these certainties in my life quite profoundly. "Virtually all of the evil in the world is committed by people who are absolutely certain they know what

they're doing." A little doubt seemed a necessary ingredient in my pursuit of truth. After all, as Descartes said, "For one who is a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things."

In a sense, I had done this long before when I placed all my doctrinal perceptions off to the side and began anew. But, like the opening of Pandora's Box, I found myself grappling with doubts I had never dealt with before—doubts that challenged and tried my faith into refined and renewed certainties about Jesus that I never before could have fathomed. I can now truly say that Jesus is my Friend, my Companion and Comrade in the struggles and joys of a life that, though void of so much, is so genuinely full of the blessings Grace alone can provide.

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IN THE YEARS THAT HAVE PASSED since the Lord renewed my mind, my wife has left me and my relationship with my children has been severed. Oddly enough, my imprisonment wasn't the cause of these painful losses—but rather my rejection of Mormon doctrine. I've endured times when hope and purpose in life seemed nowhere to be found—times when God felt very distant and the ache in my heart was overwhelming. Yet that precious Truth I came to know in the County Jail still abides with me today.

It is my hope that in the writing of this book, the lessons of failure it records will help us avoid its reoccurrence in the future. This is my hope, my prayer and my duty to the Avery family, who paid the ultimate price for a faith gone astray.

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