

Chapter 2

A LONELY PATH, YET YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Never will I leave you;
never will I forsake you.

—Hebrews 13:5

As we pass through different stages of life, we look to those who have gone ahead of us. When we marry, we look to our own parents as examples and to the parents of friends—whether consciously or unconsciously. As we mature, we recognize that others have blazed the trail. They show us what marriage is like—for better or for worse. The same is true with raising children. The primary examples of what parents look like are our own parents. And again, knowingly or not, we replicate many patterns we learned from our own upbringing. We continue to look to others ahead to learn how to age and, in the natural course of life, how to approach death.

There is one stage in some lives, however, that provides few examples to follow and no one to look to for guidance—the experience of leaving a pseudo-Christian cult and moving into genuine Christian faith. Many people have done it. But in our time of need, these people may not be visible to us. And in the heat of our own trial we often become convinced that no one has ever truly experienced what we are going through.

There are good reasons for these feelings of alienation—of being alone. When leaving a cult, people often experience intense mental, emotional and spiritual upheaval—all deeply personal and complex. Most likely, we do not fully grasp what’s going on within ourselves. So how could anyone else?

The experience is so difficult that some give up on it altogether. They conclude that if their former church was not true, then nothing else can be. They have been burned once, and they vow inwardly—perhaps unconsciously—that they will “never love again.” This is a great tragedy. Why leave a pseudo-Christian cult if only to wander off and give up on Christ altogether? So why does this happen? As I mentioned above, it is a very deeply personal and intense process, fraught with pain. Some just don’t have the staying power to see it through. Instead of hanging in for the cure, they give up—and remain ill forever.

There is a parallel in physical therapy. After an injury or surgery one must engage in certain exercises to regain the entire range of movement and

full use of a joint. But if the person is not willing to stay with the therapy routine, range of movement will be impaired and the joint will never return to full functionality. It's just that simple. So it is in the spiritual realm. The Lord says, "I wound, and I heal" (Deut. 32:39 KJV). You've already been wounded—why not stick around for the healing? Don't give up!

Typical Steps in Leaving a Cult

When I left the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS) in 1989, I never thought I would be able to describe the process I went through. I would not have believed it was subject to a step-by-step analysis. But it is. And in the years since, I have known and ministered to many others who have experienced a very similar path. There are identifiable stages in leaving a pseudo-Christian cult and turning to genuine Christianity. The stages listed here will help you know where you are and where you are going. *Please note: As messy as this process seems, it is the Lord's way of bringing you to a true and right relationship with Him. The sooner you can come to accept that, the easier the process becomes. It also nurtures the return of hope and joy.*

1. **Awareness.** Though you are securely established in your pseudo-Christian cult, the Lord begins to make you aware that there is something wrong or that something is missing. You begin to realize that the claims of your church cannot honestly be supported by the Bible. You continue on, but your antennae are up—you become increasingly alert to snags in your church's scriptures and/or theology. You may put these problems on the back burner so you can remain active in the church. Perhaps you even justify these problems or rationalize that maybe it's just you or your understanding that's to blame. After all, everyone else you know seems comfortable enough with things as they are.
2. **Research—Crossing the Line.** The problems and inconsistencies you've discovered spill over from the back burner to the front burner. They have become too numerous and too troubling to ignore any longer. You give them more and more of your attention and study. Instead of resolving difficulties, your increased research and study only bring more problems to light. Then you cross a line. You conclude that it's worse than you thought. Why didn't you find out these things earlier? Why didn't you question things instead of just blindly accepting them? You decide that your church is just wrong—not at all the conclusion you were expecting or hoping for. You know you cannot retain your spiritual integrity if you stay in this church. You know you must leave it. *Please keep in mind that these may not*

yet be conscious, well-worded thoughts. At this point they may just be feelings deep inside you.

3. **Preparing to Leave.** In your heart and mind you begin distancing yourself from your church and from others within it. You begin taking stock of relationships you have and the investment you have in your church. You begin putting your church and all that it has meant to you into perspective with everything else in your life: your other relationships, your work or school, and so on. You may not even know it at this point, but you are planning your escape. You're getting a good fix on exactly where you're at before you make a move.
4. **Leaving.** You've done your homework. Your research has convinced you your church is wrong. No one can convince you otherwise. To retain your spiritual integrity you must leave. You've sized up what you are leaving behind. And you've decided you can do this—it's time to leave now. Most likely, you make some kind of announcement to someone that you are leaving. This can be quite messy and unpleasant, which doesn't help anything. You just know you have to leave and so you do. You walk out the door, never to return. But you're not quite sure yet what lies just on the other side of that door.
5. **The Disorientation of Being Freshly Out.** There. You've done it! You're out of there. No more conflicts with distorted scriptures and theology. No more rationalizing things that are just wrong. But—where now? You know what you've left behind is wrong, but what's *right*? You don't really know anyone at a different church. And if you just pick a church, how will you know if they've gotten it right? And what about God? Your old church framed your understanding of Him. You learned to *relate* to God through the lens of your old church. Without that lens, how will you relate to Him now? *Are you sure you've done the right thing? You hope so, because there's no going back.*
6. **Stumbling Around.** You finally pick a church and begin attending. Perhaps you decide to church shop, so you go to a new church every week or two. You feel confused, not knowing really what you're supposed to be looking for. You're awkward as you talk with people, not knowing quite how to describe what you've just come out of. You're actually a bit embarrassed. *When will this be over? Are we there yet?*

7. **Discovery and Growth.** In all your traveling about, you discover the real gospel, and you begin learning the truth about Jesus. You repent of your sins and commit your life to Him. You've become a Christian, and you know it. In fact, you're quite confident in that now. You begin devouring the Bible and making friends of other believers. Life is new and exciting, quite different—and better—than you ever thought possible in your old cult church.
8. **Onward to Maturity.** You settle into a church and put down roots. You love worshipping God at church services. You are an active member of a small group or class, where you are constantly learning more about God through His Word. You are daily learning the depth of God's grace, and you delight in extending His grace to others. You serve your church body in various ways and provide leadership when called upon. Life is satisfying, and you look forward expectantly to living with your Lord in the life to come, deeply confident in your relationship with Him.

While this outline of stages may seem well organized and tidy, the experience itself is far from tidy. In fact, in the early stages it's terribly messy! Most of us don't do it well or with grace. After all, it's something we've never done before, and we had no example to follow. We just plowed ahead as best we could and hoped for the best. But behind the scenes, our Lord Jesus Christ was at work the whole time. He never stopped. And at a certain point we began to understand that and to thank Him for it.

Navigating Those Strong Currents

The early stages of this process are full of intense mental, emotional and spiritual upheaval—all deeply personal and complex, all accompanied by deep pain. One troubling aspect of the experience is that it seems there is nothing we can do to stop it. It seems to have a mind of its own. It's like we are caught up in a humongous ocean wave and are powerless to control it. We must just let it have its way until it is finished with us.

Troubling, too, is the fact that there are so many things going on inside us *all at the same time*. The turmoil becomes so complex it defies understanding. I believe it is helpful to get a lot of this out on the table. If we can come to put a name on some of what is going on inside us, it becomes less threatening and more manageable. And it may well speed the recovery process. So I'm going to list a number of the thoughts and feelings that tend to flood over us in those early stages. Every person will experience them differently and to a different degree. Please understand that these feelings are not listed in any particular order or priority.

- **Alienation.** From church, family, friends, self and, most importantly, God—most of what gives structure and meaning to our lives. When it’s all uprooted in a single action, who wouldn’t feel alienated? Cults cut off those who leave. They have to do this in order to maintain their own belief system and their own sanity. Severing ties often includes close family members. If your family does not cut you off entirely, you will most likely experience a new and chilling distance in the relationships.

Good friends and family reinforce our sense of our value as human beings, our sense of self-worth, the way we see ourselves. And we help reinforce our mutual belief system with each other. If we become alienated from friends and family, it’s only natural that we would feel alienated from ourselves as well.

And how about God? Our old church profoundly shaped our view of God, like a lens. We learned to worship Him, serve Him and relate to Him through that lens. When that lens lies shattered under our feet, how will we relate to Him? In time He will construct a new lens for us. But until then our relationship with Him may feel strained.

The result is feeling we have awakened on some other planet. But take heart—this doesn’t last forever. Don’t let it overcome you. *And know this—whether or not you can feel it right now—God has never stopped loving you and never will.* In fact, it was His great love for you that prompted Him to free you from your error. Try to trust Him to complete the good work He has started in you.

- **Insecurity.** You were once secure in your old church, perhaps even smug that you had a far better church than most others. You felt you had an inside track to God because of your superior theology. But now, those you left behind consider you a “son of perdition”—doomed to destruction for turning your back on “the ultimate truth.”

Several years after we left it, my wife and I ran into the man who ordained me in our old church, and his wife, in a store. The wife did not hesitate to tell us that we had lost our salvation for leaving the RLDS church and abandoning our testimony of the Book of Mormon. We had been out of that church long enough that her comments did not cause us to doubt, but it still hurt to be thought of in that light by old friends.

But in those early days it’s a different story. We have not only been estranged from our old church family, they now consider us doomed to eternal destruction. That’s far worse than just being alienated—they have spiritually condemned us as well. While their charge is untrue, we have not been out long enough to establish a stable and accurate Christian foundation to really know better. And

so their spiritual view of us hurts all the more. It may create an even greater sense of insecurity. Where *do* I stand with God now, anyway?

- **Anger.** You have a lot to be angry about. What in the world did you do to deserve this? You were just an innocent bystander. Why should you have to deal with all this carnage? It's not your fault your old church is wrong. You didn't create it. Someone else did. Now you're paying the price for someone else's error. And besides, you were sincere. It's not as though you woke up one morning and made a conscious decision to become a heretic.

So just exactly who are you angry at? Oh, let me list the people.

- ✓ First, the founder of your old church, who created the problem in the first place. Idiot! If it wasn't for him/her you wouldn't be in this fix.
- ✓ Next, there is the collective leadership of your old church, both past and present—those you have known and those you haven't. How dare they perpetuate a system of religion that is wrong! How dare they deceive you—and so many others! Why haven't *they* figured out that it's wrong? You did. And they're in much more responsible positions than you. What's wrong with them?
- ✓ And how about those you left behind? Did they listen attentively as you told them why you were leaving? Did any of them agree with you and leave, too? Probably not. In fact, they treated you like a space alien and cut you off when they couldn't change your mind. What's wrong with them? After all, you did all the hard work, and they wouldn't even take you seriously.
- ✓ Then there's you. How could you have been so deceived for so long? It's humiliating, isn't it? You were duped, taken in. And now you're angry with yourself for having bought the whole package.
- ✓ And finally there's God. How could He have let this happen to you? After all, you were sincerely trying to worship and serve Him to the best of your ability. And this is what you get in return?

I told you that you had a lot to be angry about, didn't I?

- **Depression.** Watch out for this one. Depression and anger are merely different sides of the same coin. I have been amazed to see the truth

of this in my own life, when I have brought myself to look objectively at what I was experiencing. Modern psychology doesn't have all the answers, but I believe it can help us better understand our emotional makeup. And simply gaining an understanding can help.

Psychology does indeed say that anger and depression work together. They function as a u-tube, if you will. When the fluid level is high in one side of the tube, it's low in the other. When you feel your anger and actively engage with it, you don't feel depressed. But as your anger subsides you may experience an anger hangover—depression. And when you feel depressed, you won't feel much anger. The emotions flow back and forth.

- **Humiliation.** Admitting you were deceived and then leaving a pseudo-Christian cult is, among other things, humiliating. You once felt you were so very right. To wake up one day and have to admit to yourself, to others and to God that you were not right but in fact were very wrong is hard on the psyche. It's the right thing to do and the most honest thing to do—but a very difficult thing to do. It's depressing to be humbled and to have to start your faith journey all over again, unsure even how to do that. It's like laboring for a very long time on your ideal dream home, just to have a tornado come through and reduce all your work to a pile of rubble. It can be hard to muster the will to start over after all that. It's—depressing.
- **Self-doubt.** Self-doubt is one of the worst feelings and one of the greatest stumbling blocks to moving forward. It cuts right to the core of your personality. If you were so thoroughly fooled once, what's to keep you from being fooled again? It's hard to bear the thought that you could be fooled a second time. It was hard enough this time. How can you ever really embrace a church and its people again? What if the new church turns out to be just as bad as your old church? What will that say about you? This one can be scary.
- **Fear.** Lots to be afraid of. You sometimes fear you've done the wrong thing by leaving, even though your mind is telling you it was the right thing.

And its scary walking into a new church. The people all want you to join in and enjoy it. But you keep watching for a skeleton to pop out of some closet. What if the pastor is preaching something off base? How long before you will know? You don't know what it's going to take for you to relax and settle in here.

All of this feels like a joint that has become dislocated. What if it never goes back into socket? What if you never fit in again?

- **Confusion.** You've become convinced your old church is wrong, but what's right? There are so many flavors of Christianity out there. Can they all be right? Could they all be wrong? They all claim to be Christian, but they are all so different. How can you know what *real* Christianity is? How can you hope to navigate this complex web of twenty-first-century American Christianity? Will you spend your life in a church that hasn't gotten it right—just to find out years later that just down the block is a church that did?

I'm not going to pretend that this is an exhaustive list of all the feelings you may be experiencing. There may be others, or you may describe the ones above differently than I have. I wanted to provide this list in order to help you understand the overwhelmingly strong currents flowing down deep inside. My experience, and that of others, is that these thoughts and feelings are all raging at the same time and raging strongly. Once you begin to identify and understand some of them, you may be able to manage them better.

Reasons to be Thankful

If fragmentation and emotional upset were all you have to look forward to, it would be a grim picture. But you should know that this stuff won't last forever. It does get better the longer you are out. And I want to take a minute right now to put your situation in a little better perspective. You are actually to be congratulated for how far you've come. Please give yourself a pat on the back. What you have done demonstrates *tremendous courage* and *spiritual integrity*. Don't you dare take these things lightly! Why? Because there are many other people who have not been able to muster the courage you have just demonstrated. I have seen a number of other people do the research you have done. But as they begin counting the cost of leaving their cult, they back away from their research and put their heads back in the sand! Something inside tells them the cost is too high. They decide they don't have the strength, or don't want to pay the price to leave family and friends behind to follow the Lord in Spirit and in truth. Shame on them! These are the ties that *blind*, which Jesus described in Matthew 10:34–38.

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn “a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.” Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

But you are not the only one to be congratulated here. The Lord is the one who has drawn you out of your error in order to draw you to Himself for

eternal fellowship. It is He who created your hunger for His Word and for its truth. He is the One who guided your study and gave you new questions to ask. It is He who gave you the answers you were looking for. And finally, it is He who gave you the courage, integrity and strength to leave your cult behind. And it is He who stands before you now, beckoning you into a future with Him. And not just in the here and now, but throughout eternity, where you will enjoy each other *forever*. He's getting a jump on *forever* by drawing you close *now*. Thank Him for that. He is demonstrating His great love for you and demonstrating His power in your life. It is a miracle, and He is to be thanked and praised for His holiness being demonstrated in your life right now. Praise God!