

Conversion Story of James Kent Voyles

The Fateful Weekend

The day could not have been more beautiful. The sun reflected off the white snow and the air was crisp in the late afternoon. The skiing conditions were superb on the carefully groomed slopes of Sundance ski resort near Provo, Utah. We had spent the morning running errands in town and, finally, we were on the slopes doing what we came to do over the President's Day weekend in 1976. I was an avid skier. In my hometown of Boise, Idaho, I had season passes at the local resort from the time I was eight years old, and the prior year I had skied some fifty times. This was the first time I would ski in Utah, and it was beginning fabulously.

My girlfriend's family, also from Boise, had invited me to Provo for a long weekend of skiing. I had no idea at the time what the weekend would come to mean in my life. Skiing was the most important thing I did besides football, and skiing in Utah would be like reaching the major leagues.

I had dated Clarin Williams since I met her at the State Fair in Boise as I began my sophomore year and she began her junior year of high school. She was a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but that was okay with me. I had become comfortable with the church members who were students at my junior high and high schools because my values were more common with theirs, and one my closest friends was a member of the church.

From the time we met, Clarin's family had taken me in and treated me extremely well despite the Church's suggestion that its youth not date non-members. Rather than shun me, they accepted me and in fact included me in family prayer and many other family activities. I was

invited to go snow and water skiing and to many family gatherings. It was fun, and I was attracted to their cohesiveness, which was plainly attributable to their religion.

When they asked me to go skiing with them that February weekend, there was no doubt I would go. In addition to skiing, Clarin would also be going to visit the BYU campus. She wanted to go to college there, and I was curious about it. So off we went. The drive from Boise to Provo was terrible with rain or sleet all the way on Thursday night, but on Friday the weather cleared and the sun shone brightly. We arose early and went to the BYU admissions office where Clarin visited with a counselor. Afterwards, Sister Williams' father, Earl Glade, who was a Communications professor in Broadcasting at BYU, showed us around the campus. BYU was very impressive with its clean cut students and its immaculately groomed and maintained buildings and grounds.

After a few more errands and lunch, we hit the slopes for a great afternoon of skiing. Sundance was a little too easy for me, but the snow was in excellent condition and it was just good to be out in the sun doing what I loved to do. Everybody in the family was able to ski – including Clarin's parents and four siblings.

In the evening, we went to a BYU-Arizona basketball game at the new Marriott Center. It was a great facility, and the crowd was different – unusually well-mannered but nevertheless enthusiastic – as BYU upset Arizona. Fans expressed displeasure at bad calls, but there were few, if any, “boos.” The crowd was mostly encouraging and sportsmanlike. I was becoming interested in BYU.

As the evening wound down into night, I became extremely nervous. I felt a cold coming on, and I knew that another friend of the Williams had ruined one of their previous vacations by becoming ill and causing the family to go home early. I did not want to be the cause of cutting

short an important vacation, so I decided to pray. I had always been interested in religion, and I had attended Seminary with Clarin a few times. I had prayed at various times throughout my youth over various matters, and this one was extremely important to me. I was praying fervently that I would not get sick and ruin the trip for everybody. I struggled, but my prayer was answered and I did not become ill.

On Saturday morning we got up well before the crack of dawn and headed toward Powder Mountain near Ogden (it would be the site of the downhill skiing competition in the 2002 Olympics). Bad weather had moved in and it had snowed most of the night. The drive was difficult, and when we arrived at the resort at around 9:00 a.m., it was still snowing one to two inches per hour. The less experienced skiers stayed at the lodge, believing they would not be able to handle the deep powder. A few of us diehards headed for the most difficult runs and the deepest powder. I can safely say that with fresh powder on every run until early afternoon, it was one of the best days of skiing I ever experienced. Late in the day, the sun came out and the whole group skied a few runs together before heading back to Provo.

That evening in Provo, BYU was to play Arizona State. I was thoroughly exhausted but could not resist the opportunity to go back to the Marriott Center. I silently prayed once again that despite the deep fatigue and lack of sleep, I would remain healthy. BYU upset Arizona State that night, and it was another fabulous experience.

The next morning was Sunday, and the whole family would be going to Church. This was back in the days when we went to Church “all day.” Priesthood was around 8:00 a.m. for an hour, followed by Sunday School for an hour and a half at around 10:00 a.m., with Sacrament meeting for an hour and a half at around 3:00 p.m. The Williams and Glades informed me that I need not attend Church, especially since we had skied so hard and stayed up so late each night.

Nevertheless, I felt I ought to go since it was their trip and their custom to attend Church. They emphasized that I really did not need to attend Priesthood, but I insisted. At some unearthly hour, we arose, prepared, and headed for Priesthood meeting. It was not an ordinary meeting; rather it was Stake Quarterly Priesthood meeting. By the end, I wished I had decided to stay in bed. It was my first Priesthood meeting and may yet be the most boring Church meeting I have ever attended, especially on only about four hours of sleep. The speaker was discussing all aspects of a topic without saying what the topic was. He was terribly dry, monotonous, and disorganized. By the time he finished, I didn't care what the topic was, I wanted breakfast!

Sunday School was different. After opening exercises, we split into our classes. I was with the seventeen and eighteen year-old class with about five students. The teacher was Brother Richardson, and he spoke in a very low humble voice. His lesson was quite simple. He said he had been fasting and praying to know what worth he had in the sight of God and it had been a very humbling experience for him. He said that he had wondered all week what he would say if the Savior were to appear before him. What exactly, would he have to say for himself? The room filled with some kind of warm and powerful feeling that enveloped each person. Brother Richardson continued by asking each student in the room, one at a time, what they would say for themselves if the Savior were standing before them that day. Some cried, and most said something to the effect that they needed to do better.

When it was my turn, I was nearly speechless. All I could manage to say in light of the overpowering feeling in the room was, "I am not a member, I guess I had better do something about it."

He replied quietly, "It's so very important."

I sat pondering the rest of Sunday School.

I later learned that Brother Richardson had given precisely the same lesson the week before but felt compelled by the Spirit, for reasons unknown to him, to repeat the lesson. I will always be grateful that he was so responsive to the promptings of the Spirit.

Sacrament meeting was not too bad. It was a missionary farewell, which were still a major family production in those days, with the family being given the whole hour to have family members talk and provide musical numbers before the missionary gave an emotional and memorable farewell address. I don't remember much about this particular one, other than that I felt the same warm feeling I felt in Sunday School. In any event, I was so exhausted and continued to pray that I would not get sick.

Dinner at the Glades was delicious. I cannot remember what we ate, but as was my custom at that age, I ate three or four times as much as anyone else at the table, which was pleasing to the cook, Sister Glade.

The remainder of the evening, we watched the last night of the 1976 Winter Olympics from Sapporo, Japan. The featured event was ski jumping, with Japanese competitors trying to make history by winning gold in their own land. As I recall, they did in fact make history by winning the gold. I lay on the floor, sleepy, content, enjoying the beauty of the ski jumping, and sensing deep within that something had changed in me that day in that Sunday School class. In a way I did not yet comprehend, my life was different and would never be the same.

We drove home to Boise the next day, and I thought about all that I had seen and heard and felt at BYU, on the slopes, and especially at Church. Then a few days later it just kind of happened. I do not remember why I did it. I do not recall a conscious decision-making process. It just seemed to be the right thing to do. I picked up the phone and dialed the Williams'

number. Clarin answered. “Can you give me the missionaries’ phone number? I would like them to teach me the lessons.”

I later learned that Clarin covered the phone and jumped up and down with delight at the thought of me taking the missionary discussions.

Prior Religious Experience

From as far back as I can remember, I had attended Church with my father. Growing up, we went to the Lutheran church. I assumed Dad had always been a Lutheran, but I later learned that his family background was Southern Baptist and that when they moved to Salt Lake City, the Voyles had joined the First Presbyterian Church. Dad’s family was originally from the South. His grandfather was born in South Carolina and his father in Alabama. The family eventually settled in Central Florida where they grew oranges. My grandfather, Early B Voyles, went to business school and became a grocer. He and his brother Walter took a trip to the west in 1903. I believe they first went to California and then up the coast to Seattle, Washington. On the way back to Florida, the train stopped in Salt Lake City. Early saw a grocery store for sale and bought it on the spot. He eventually made his way back to Florida in 1905 and married his sweetheart, Annie Lois Malsby. They moved to Salt Lake City, where my father, Woodrow B Voyles, was born in 1917. Only one of their five children, Aunt Mildred, became a member of the Church.

My mother, Leah Fern Peterson, was of pioneer stock. She was born in Hayden, Utah and raised in Vernal, Utah. Her mother was a descendent of English converts to the Church, and her father was a descendent of Danish converts. Among my ancestors was Samuel Thompson, who was an early convert to the Church in New York and knew Joseph Smith. Samuel was in Kirtland, Far West, and Nauvoo. He marched with Zion’s Camp and the Mormon Battalion, and

was present when gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill in California. While I claim to be a pure convert because my mother had no influence on my conversion, I must recognize that I was a descendent of faithful members who were pioneers, and my conversion must be seen, at least in part, as fulfilling promises made to my faithful forefathers. And I must also confess that my grandmother, who overcame substantial hardship while raising five children largely alone – she buried three husbands – reminded me to pray when I was around ten years old during a visit to our home in Boise. She asked me if I remembered to say my prayers before going to bed. I had not, but did so from time to time thereafter.

Grandma influenced me in another way that I never really understood before. Her project in her old age was to provide her children and grandchildren with a "Book of Remembrance" before she died. She labored ceaselessly into the wee hours of the morning with poor eyesight to prepare these books for us. They were our Christmas present one year, and she included some LDS literature about Joseph Smith and the Temple in the back of the books. I never paid much attention to it, but at times I wondered what it all meant.

Mom was raised in the Church but never really went. She said she went to Mutual sometimes, but Sacrament meeting was for old people. Dad hated the Church for some reason, which is not uncommon among non-members growing up in Salt Lake City. A neighbor once told me that he went to Mutual when he was young and was interested in the Church, but I do not know how she would have known, and she has long since passed away, so I have no way of knowing what her source of information was. Maybe Mom told her that. Dad's views of the Church may have been colored by his membership in the Masons. Having gone to Masonic events in Utah, I perceived, and I may be wrong, that it has developed as somewhat of a non-member counterculture. Whatever the reason, he never expressed any positive feelings toward

the Church with the exception of high regard for BYU and, much later in life, a few positive comments about the benefits of my sons and I having served missions for the Church.

At some point when my two older brothers and I were very young, Mom and Dad decided we needed to go to church. Rather than go to the Church of Jesus Christ or Presbyterian Church, they selected the Immanuel Lutheran Church on Fort Street in Boise, or at least Dad did. Mom was nominally a member of that church but I do not recall too many times that she actually went. Most Sundays she stayed home and really only came on special occasions. I was never sure whether she just didn't feel well or whether she just didn't believe what the Lutherans taught. She was at my Lutheran baptism, my oldest brother's confirmation, and she made an appearance on holidays or if we were singing, but I remember little beyond that.

As for me, I spent most of my time in the worship service tracing the veins on my Dad's hands, watching the candles flicker in the front of the chapel, or otherwise passing the time away quietly. By the time I was a little older, perhaps somewhere between eight and ten years, I would read the creeds and various aspects of the liturgy and try to figure out what they meant. The creeds were particularly confusing. My primary question about them was whether God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost were three people or one person. The creeds seemed to say they were three and then seemed to reverse and say they were one. I was so confused that I asked my Sunday School teacher one day. She simply said, "I don't know." That ended my inquiry for a time, but I never forgot it.

By the time I was in seventh grade my brothers and I had pretty much abandoned the Lutheran church. Kevin, the oldest, had been confirmed but really disliked the pastor, a mean German man who related poorly to the youth. Terry, my middle brother, never saw much point to religion, and finally stopped going. I do not know why I stopped other than my brothers did.

Dad got tired of going alone, and eventually he stopped going as well, although at the height of our attendance he had been Superintendent of the Lutheran Sunday School.

In the meantime, I had become friends with a neighborhood boy by the name of Gordy Morris. Gordy and his family attend the First Christian Church, later renamed University Christian Church, across from the Boise State University campus. The church building itself was an interesting structure, known as mid-century modern. It was torn down to make room to expand the Boise State campus. The church had a great youth choir that took annual trips. Gordy and his mother, Ruth, invited me to attend and participate in the choir. I was in seventh grade and was interested in religion, so I went. The youth in the choir were nice, and the organist, Mark Wilson, became a very good friend. The choir trip that first summer was to Seattle and Vancouver, B.C. The following summer we went to Los Angeles and Disneyland.

The First Christian Church baptized by immersion, and I witnessed a few baptisms while I was attending Sunday services. The font was in the front of the sanctuary, up on the left-hand side, and they baptized people from time-to-time during the main worship service. The thought never crossed my mind that I could be baptized, too, and nobody ever suggested the idea to me. I suppose I would have been baptized had someone offered. My real interest was the discussion of having a personal relationship with the Savior. That seemed to be the correct path to tread, so I prayed and decided in the eighth grade that I would have such a relationship. But I really wasn't sure what I was supposed to do. After some fitful attempts, I kind of shelved the idea for a time but continued to participate with the youth group and choir.

My friendships with members of the Church of Jesus Christ flourished over the next couple of years, and when I turned 14, I started attending Church youth dances nearly every Saturday night. I attended with two nonmember and one member friends at various Stake

Centers around Boise and Meridian. We were regular fixtures. There were hot chicks there, so we never missed. I also attended Mutual with boys from the Third Ward, who had taken up night skiing at Bogus Basin as one of their activities. My impression of the Church, despite my Dad's views, was largely positive.

Then, of course, Clarin and the Williams family entered the picture. In addition to the many other fun things I did with them, they took me to a stage production of *Saturday's Warrior*, a play about a family's experience with the pre-mortal existence, this earth life, and the life hereafter. Through that production, and by asking questions of the Williams, I gained a rudimentary knowledge of the Plan of Salvation.

Brother Williams also happened to be the President of the Stake Quorum of the Seventy. Back in those days, instead of calling Stake or Ward missionaries, men were called into a separate office in the Priesthood – the Seventy. Because of his position, young missionaries were constantly in their home when I was visiting Clarin. The first companionship I recall included Elders Mark Baker and Mark Baker. I understood them to have the same middle initial as well. The one who eventually baptized me was from California; I do not recall where the other one was from. When I was at the Williams' home in late 1975, the missionaries told me their job was to teach people and they would like to teach me. I politely declined. They asked again when we played basketball at the chapel on Christmas Day that year, and I again declined.

In January, with the new semester at school starting, I took my fifth period of the day as an open period so I could play basketball with the football coach and players. Clarin cleverly took her free hour for Seminary during fifth period and occasionally talked me into going across the street with her to the Seminary building. I was interested in religion, and they were studying the Old Testament. The courses were great, and the teachers, Brother Chandler and Brother

Mills, were friendly, interested in me, and awesome instructors. I liked the feeling of being there.

Another event of that winter is worth mentioning. A couple of friends and I were teasing the sophomore football coach, Don Clegg, about the fact that he was over thirty and unmarried. After putting up with our badgering for a few minutes, he ended the conversation by saying, “If you don’t have any standards to live for, what’s the point in living?” Coach Clegg had unwittingly asked a question that would impact me many times over during the rest of my life. He turns out to have been a truly great teacher in terms of life impacts.

By the time of President’s Day weekend in February 1976, many factors were converging to change my life forever.

The Testimony

I called the missionaries and set a time to meet with them at the Williams’ home. The missionaries told me, however, that I would have to get my parent’s written permission before they could teach me. The situation was tense when I asked my mother and father for their permission. Dad was stressed about my involvement with “the Mormons,” and he concluded that listening to the missionaries would show me what they were really all about. He also asked me to check into DeMolay, the youth organization of the Masons, which I flatly refused. In my perception, only nerds went to DeMolay. He and Mom both signed the permission slip.

My heart and mind were very anxious to get on with the missionary discussions. On the appointed evening, I went to the Williams’ home and sat down on the couch by Clarin in the family room. Two chairs were set up facing the couch for the missionaries to sit on while teaching. Brother Williams came in and presented me with a *Book of Mormon*. It was one prepared for the 1976 World Expo in Seattle, Washington, and the cover featured a depiction of

the prophet Mormon sitting at a desk and writing in a room full of ancient metal plates and other records. After handing it to me, Brother Williams looked me straight in the eyes, pointed his finger at me, and said, “I want it to be clear to you and your parents that we are in no way pressuring you to hear the discussions or to join our Church. You are listening by your own choice and we will stand behind you whether you join our Church or not.” He was so stern that I doubted for a moment whether I should listen to the missionaries at all. But my hesitation was brief as Elders Baker and Baker arrived shortly.

The first discussion was amazing. I knew some of what they talked about, although I had never heard the Joseph Smith story in detail before. The most amazing part of the discussion, however, was not what the Elders said, but the way it felt. In the first and subsequent discussions, I felt inside that I already *knew* what they were telling me, and I already *knew* it was true – it was just that no one had ever *told* me before. The message had a singular ring to it that touched me to the depths of my soul. It literally felt like my soul was doing somersaults inside my body. I was so excited that I could barely sit still.

As we approached the end of the first discussion, the Elders said that Joseph Smith learned while in the Sacred Grove that God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, were separate and distinct beings with bodies of flesh and bones as tangible of man’s. They further explained that the Holy Ghost was a personage of spirit. The thoughts of my previous question to my Lutheran Sunday School teacher, who could not answer whether there were three separate members of the Godhead or they were all the same, flooded into my mind and I knew immediately that what the Elders were saying was true. It had to be; they taught what I *already* believed to be the true concept of God.

At the end of the discussion, they read me the promise in Moroni 10:3-5. I said the prayer at their request. After setting the next appointment, we exchanged pleasantries and I headed home, walking a few feet off the ground. I was so excited.

When I got home, the house was empty. Kevin was at college, Terry was rarely home, and Mom and Dad had gone to the grocery store. I saw this as my chance to really pray. I went into my bedroom, closed the door, and read the promise in Moroni 10. I then knelt down and prayed to know if Joseph Smith was truly a prophet. I did not see a light or hear a voice, but I knew through the power of God at that moment that Joseph Smith was a prophet and what the missionaries said was true. I knew it deep in my soul and from my head to my toes. I could picture Joseph in the Sacred Grove seeing what he said he saw. It was true – and I was to serve a mission. That last point caught me with a certain degree of surprise and wonderment. Where did that come from? But I was faithful to the revelation received in that moment.

The Baptismal Challenge

During the second discussion, my spirit again felt like it was doing somersaults within my body. There is simply no other way to describe it. I knew what the Elders were teaching was absolutely true. They filled in the details of the Plan of Salvation. I knew that I was a child of God and wanted to do what it took to return to Him in the Celestial Kingdom.

Before the third discussion, the blonde Elder Baker was transferred. He was replaced by Elder Craig Toleman of northern Utah. He was also a great missionary and I very much enjoyed getting to know him. I pretended that I still had doubts about whether Joseph Smith was a prophet and whether the Church was true because I did not want to appear over-anxious. But I think my ruse was thinly disguised; it was truly impossible to mask my excitement.

Then the missionaries surprised me. They asked if I would set a date to be baptized. My answer was straightforward: “My dad will never agree to that.” The Elders and Clarin suggested I go ahead and ask my parents, and I determined to do so. I was still excited about the Gospel, but my spirit was dampened somewhat by the prospect of having to deal with Dad on this issue.

I do not recall whether it was the same evening or a subsequent evening that I approached Mom and Dad in the family room about being baptized. I do not remember the details about how I asked, but I do remember an extremely angry response from my father. He said that I was being “dazzled by the all that Mormon !@##\$%^&” and that I could not be baptized for six months. Once he became angry, I did not contend further. I simply determined to show through my actions that I was serious. He could forbid me from being baptized but he could not take away the new knowledge I had obtained.

The missionaries were disappointed that I could not be baptized, but I was encouraged that the prohibition was only six months. That would not be a huge deal. I finished the discussions with the Elders over the next couple of weeks, and I started attending all the Church meetings I could. I read everything I could get my hands on regarding the Church, including *A Marvelous Work and Wonder*, but curiously, I did not read the *Book of Mormon* beyond what the missionaries assigned.

Things started changing for me in many aspects of life. At school, with a free fifth period, I began attending Seminary every day. Forget basketball, I was learning the scriptures! I loved everything about Seminary. Clarin liked Seminary, but she did not share my enthusiasm in all respects. After a few weeks she said, “You know, Jim, we don’t have to go *every* day.” Yes, we did!

My friends also began to change. My “jock” friends who liked to party did not accept my adoption of the Mormon faith with open arms. In fact, many of my “friends” wrote me off, and others actively persecuted me for my decision. I ended up in a runoff election for Senior Class President at the high school. I lost the runoff by about six votes. My old “friends” had worked against my victory because they knew that I would no longer support activities such as the “Senior Kegger.” By the middle of my Senior year, with Clarin already at BYU, my only really close friend would be a beautiful, very modest, strong, and committed young woman who also had few friends because of her standards. I also learned that there are worse things than not having lots of friends; a few weekend nights at home were fine.

The loss of friends was disappointing, especially since it involved my newly adopted religion, but I was actually grateful in the end. A couple of days after losing the election for Senior Class President, the Seminary teachers called me into their office and asked if I would like to serve on the Seminary Student Body Council the following year. I agreed that I would. The next day, as I was hurrying back to school, one of the teachers said, “Did we tell you we want you to be President?” I was stunned. They made the appointment against the advice of both Stake Presidents.

The tradition at our Seminary was to introduce the new Seminary Council by asking them to usher at Seminary graduation. There were many surprised faces when I showed up handing out programs. The subsequent general announcement of this appointment caused me some additional difficulties. The persecution from non-members increased some, and some of the active church members appeared to be somewhat jealous of the calling and some shunned me. Undaunted and largely unaware, I pressed on.

Since I wanted to serve a mission, I reconsidered my college plans as well. My brother Kevin was at Brown University, and I wanted to go to an Ivy League college, preferably Dartmouth in New Hampshire. The Air Force Academy was also very appealing, given my father's history as a pilot in World War II and in the Idaho Army National Guard. Either of those choices seemed too complicated now that I was planning a mission, and BYU was such an incredible place. If my parents would go along, it would be BYU; if they would not, the University of Utah. In either case, I was sure the school would hold scholarships during my two-year absence.

My Senior year in high school promised to be a great one. I was headed for what I believed would be all conference honors in football, I loved my new religion, and I was nearing the end of the sixth month waiting period for baptism. Then disappointment struck. I was having a fabulous season playing Church softball. I played catcher on the Ward team and I was leading the Stake in home runs – batting well over .700 (including walks). Then at the regional tournament in Idaho Fall, I slid into third base and tore the ligaments in my ankle. This was two days before football practice started. I had lived to be a football player in the starting lineup at my high school since I was old enough to remember. The Borah Lions ruled, and I was going to be playing on one of the school's best teams ever – sure to win a second state championship in a row. I had played a lot my junior year, and I saw a life-long dream begin to fade. I was struggling, but with my new religion, I knew there was more to life than football. Dad was not amused – he wanted me to play in college and apparently, he knew that the high school coach thought I could. Dad was even unhappier when I informed him while we were riding in the car one day that there were many things in life besides football and I would be fine.

Shortly thereafter, I reminded Dad that the six-month waiting period was up and I wanted to be baptized. He stated in very strong and somewhat profane terms that the six-month decision was wrong and that I had to wait at least six more months. He was especially displeased that I had been injured playing Church softball. I did not understand it at the time, but Clarin had just left for college and he really wanted to make sure I was not joining for her. So, I was turned back once again, but my resolve increased dramatically, and I continued to do everything I could in Church and focused on being an excellent Seminary president.

Football went well in the end. I started playing in the fifth game of the season, and although I was not all conference, the coach had great confidence in me, and I was able to play four different positions during the year. By the end, I was nearly an assistant coach, with the coach and quarterback taking my advice on several calls throughout the season. We won the state championship for the second year in a row. Seminary also went well. We had some great events and I loved doing work in the Church. Seminary officers also spoke in Sacrament meetings in both Stakes, so I began to have lots of opportunities to speak, which was an interesting proposition given my non-member status.

Baptism

When February 1977 arrived, another six months had passed. It had been nearly a year since I heard the missionary discussions. I knelt down one evening in my room and prayed fervently for the strength to ask Dad once again if I could be baptized. I then went to him and said, “Dad, I think I have proven that I am serious about the Church and I would like to be baptized.” He sat quietly for a few moments with cigar smoke circling his head while he played solitaire and watched television. He finally responded, “Go ahead.” I went back to my room and poured out my soul in thanksgiving to Heavenly Father for this blessing.

The next morning, I ran into the Seminary building and called Brother Mills and Brother Chandler together for “an emergency meeting.” I sat down with them in Brother Chandler’s office and opened up the Doctrine and Covenants to Section 58 and began reading:

HEARKEN, O ye elders of my church, and give ear to my word, and learn of me what I will concerning you, and also concerning this land unto which I have sent you.

For verily I say unto you, blessed is he that keepeth my commandments, whether in life or in death; and he that is faithful in tribulation, the reward of the same is greater in the kingdom of heaven.

Ye cannot behold with your natural eyes, for the present time, the design of your God concerning those things which shall come hereafter, and the glory which shall follow after much tribulation.

For after much tribulation come the blessings. Wherefore the day cometh that ye shall be crowned with much glory; the hour is not yet, but is nigh at hand.

Doctrine and Covenants 58:1-4.

They both knew immediately what I meant and one of them said, “You have permission to be baptized.” I did, and I was nearly in tears and too excited to speak; I could only smile.

The baptism would have to be right away, no delays. Stake Conference was coming up on the weekend of February 12 and 13, almost exactly a year since my singular experience in that Sunday School class in Provo. After some discussions with the missionary leaders and others, the baptism was set for Saturday night at 9:00 p.m., after the adult session of conference. Elder Paul H. Dunn was speaking at that conference, and I had the opportunity to meet him at the end of the meeting and before the start of the baptismal service. He was so kind. I was hoping he would come to my baptism, but there was much business for the Stake, and he had to move on.

The crowd at the baptism was huge. Lots of people from the Ward, lots of Seminary students, the Seminary teachers, and people I had never seen before. Clarin even returned from

BYU and sat by me on the front row. It was gratifying to have my parents there. The opening song was “Come Follow Me,” but I do not remember who said the prayer. Brother Doug Burnett gave the talk. He had been one of my greatest cheerleaders from the start. He knew Dad fairly well because Sister Burnett worked at the phone company with Dad and my older brother had gone to school with one of their boys. Brother Burnett was a good, kind man. He was always telling me how proud he was of me and how the Church needed people like me. I could always count on him for a kind word. Sister Burnett was equally wonderful. At the baptism, Brother Burnett spoke briefly, and I remember he said that because of my baptism, I would be a better son, a better student, a better citizen, and someday a better husband and a better father. He was right. Elder Baker (California) was a zone leader in the area and received permission to baptize me. Brother Williams confirmed me a member of the Church. I do not remember the closing prayer, but I think the closing song was my favorite: “The Spirit of God.”

Most notably, Dad’s demeanor had changed. He actually congratulated me and acknowledged the number of people and great amount of support shown on my behalf. Was he softening? Perhaps, but not really. Later that year, early in the summer, we went to Utah and visited Provo and BYU. Brother Glade (Sister Williams’ father) took Mom and Dad on a tour of the campus. Dad loved it. We had recently returned from my brother’s graduation from Brown University, where the student body consisted mostly of hippie types with long hair, poor personal hygiene (lots of them smelled badly), and the appearance of having just climbed out of bed. Dad, with his old-fashioned values and mores, enjoyed the fact that the youth at BYU were so clean cut. At that time, students could not wear jeans and girls were required to wear dresses or skirts. He went to the restroom and came out and said, “There is not even any graffiti on the walls like Brown.” He was sold. Mom was happy that we had arrived at a decision on college.

The most amazing thing happened after I was baptized. My grades, which were already quite good, improved. Another amazing thing, when I spoke in Sacrament meetings, I felt different. My talks were better, and the spirit seemed stronger. I was feeling the Gift of the Holy Ghost in every aspect of my life. It was one of the most incredible feelings I had experienced in my whole life, and I wanted it always to be with me.