



***Elder John M. Madsen and Elder Gary J. Coleman outside the Church Administration Building. They first met in 1961. Far right: Gary Coleman as a young student, approximately at the time of his baptism and confirmation by John Madsen on November 17, 1962.***

# New Religion

# New Life



*I longed for clarity and purpose in life, but to attend the discussion about Mormon doctrine would go against everything I had been taught.*

BY ELDER GARY J. COLEMAN,  
WITH ELDER JOHN M. MADSEN  
Of the Seventy

One day in 1961, as a student at Washington State University, I walked across the campus and noticed an advertisement for a program featuring a discussion about various religions. The first topic was “Mormon Attitude on Life and Death,” taught by John M. Madsen, a fellow student.

I had been raised in a devoutly religious home, and my family attended services regularly. My brothers and I participated faithfully as altar boys from age nine until we were young adults. During my youth the looming question was whether or not to enter into the ministry. When I was young, the bishop of our diocese said to me, “Gary, someday you will be a priest. In fact, someday you will become a bishop.” Yet something in my heart moved me to weigh life as a priest against life as a husband and father with a family. Concerns about living a life of celibacy with no marriage and no family lingered deep in my soul. I longed for clarity and purpose in life.

## Being Prepared

About a month before seeing the advertisement, I had met Judy England, a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and a fellow student at the university. In our brief, initial visit together, she told me

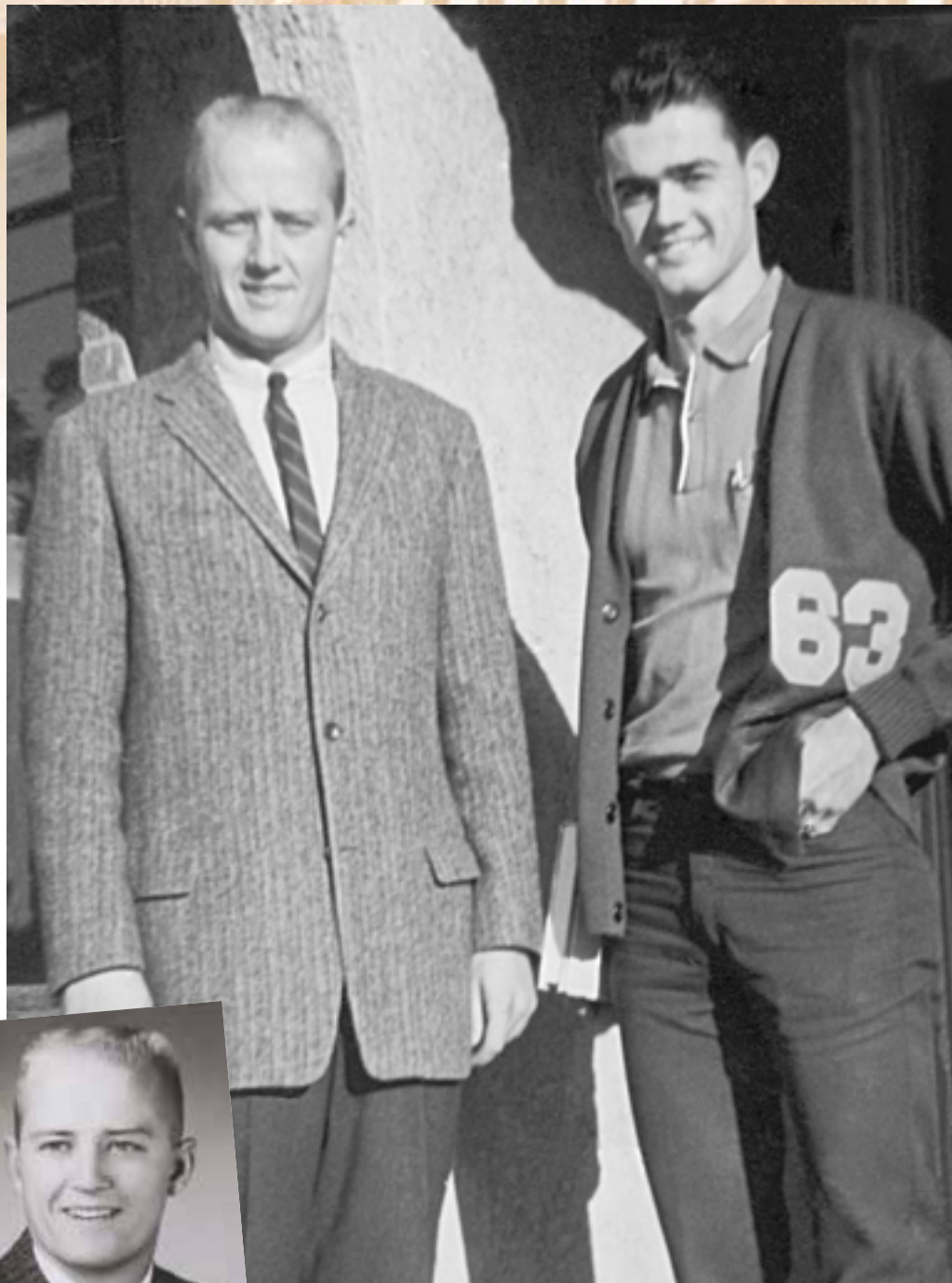
of her beliefs, her faith, and her hopes for the future. She spoke of a *true* Church, of forever families, a celestial kingdom, and eternal marriage. Though I was very religious, these concepts were totally new to me. Judy’s love of the gospel showed in the way she lived and how she spoke of what she believed. Little did I know I was being prepared for the journey of conversion into the restored gospel and God’s great plan of happiness.

Now I debated whether or not to attend the discussion about Mormon doctrine. My willful decision to listen to a presentation about a religion other than my own would be a grievous sin in the eyes of my religious leaders. The night of the program, I paced back and forth in the hall outside the lecture room for several minutes before entering. But once inside I learned about the plan of salvation, our pre-mortal life, mortality, and resurrection to eternal life with God and Jesus and family. I admired the way John taught the principles of his religion.

## Is It True?

What I heard seemed sacred and comforting, but I began to struggle with such concepts as true authority, true Church, true doctrine, true ordinances, and true scripture versus the teachings, creeds, and philosophies of men.

I continued to participate in my own church but began to seek more opportunities to learn about the Restoration. Judy and John were friends to me and examples of good



**Above: John Madsen and Gary Coleman as students at the Washington State University Institute. Left: John in a portrait from that time.**

Latter-day Saints. This was a new time in my life, a day of awakening from the traditions of my fathers into a world of truth and light. Over the next year I kept being drawn back to the principles of the gospel. I simply could not walk away. I had a great desire to learn more.

In the spring of 1962, when I was at practice as a member of the Washington State Cougars baseball team, John would often stop by to say hello, to wave or smile, and

the teacher of the investigator class that day, and he taught about the Godhead. After Sunday School, John talked with me in the foyer just before I was to leave. He said, “Well, Gary? How do you feel?” I replied, “I feel I have known these things before!” Then John said, “Gary, you have. You knew these things before you came into this life.”

When I returned to the university in the fall, John invited me to attend an early-morning seminary class

acknowledge me as a friend. My interest in Judy was also increasing, but the topic of religion kept me fearful of developing a relationship. Changing my religion was still not on my agenda.

That summer John gave me a copy of *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* by Elder LeGrand Richards (1886–1983) to read while I was working in a United States Forest Service camp. Reading this book helped answer my questions about the purpose of life. The true doctrines of Christ and the Restoration of the gospel were opened further to me. I was impressed with the clarity of the teachings about the Godhead, priesthood authority and revelation, latter-day scripture, and the plan of redemption.

One Sunday that summer I was able to attend church services at John’s ward and was welcomed with open arms. John was

he was teaching for local high school students. This helped me gain a greater understanding of the truths of the restored gospel, the role of the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the need for a restoration.

### Receiving an Answer

On Friday morning, November 2, 1962, in seminary class, John played a tape of a talk titled *Profile of a Prophet* by President Hugh B. Brown (1883–1975), then Second Counselor in the First Presidency. The previous weeks of seminary had quietly prepared me for this momentous experience in my life. During that sacred hour I gained a testimony of Joseph Smith as the Prophet of God through whom the gospel of Jesus Christ had been restored. Religious traditions I had been taught were overcome that morning by the witness I received concerning the truthfulness of the work of the Prophet. On that day in November, all of the principles and precious truths I had learned with respect to the Prophet Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon converged in my mind and heart.

I returned to my apartment after that seminary class and sincerely, with real intent, having faith in Christ, poured out my soul to God and pleaded for His guidance and direction at this crucial point in my search for truth. During this act of faith and humility before God, the power of the Holy Ghost enveloped my entire being, burning out every doubt, fear, and concern as to what I must do. Feelings of relief and assurance swept over me, and I knew that my life was about to change dramatically. I returned to the seminary building and said to John, “I would like to join your Church.” He arranged for the missionaries to teach me the discussions, and we set a date for my baptism.

My spiritual rebirth was real but also very painful. My parents and family were crushed as they learned of my decision to join the Church. Judy and John were thrilled,



**Gary and Judy Coleman in 1967. Judy was influential in introducing Gary to the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. They married in 1963 in the Cardston Alberta Temple.**

but now I was dealing with acceptance and joy on one side and rejection and disappointment on the other.

Conversion experiences are based upon three pillars: friends in the Church; responsibility through service; and nurturing through study, participation, and prayer. Thirty-five years after my baptism, President Gordon B. Hinckley listed these as necessary elements of conversion while speaking to the Church about missionary work and retention.<sup>1</sup> These same pillars were essential in my conversion.

### Parallels

After I was baptized and as time has gone on, there have been many parallels between John’s life and mine. I was able to further learn about priesthood service as John’s junior companion in our home teaching assignments. He pursued a career in the Church Educational System, and so did I. In 1963 I married Judy in the Cardston Alberta Temple, and John married Diane Dursteler in the Salt Lake Temple. John and I both received bachelor’s degrees from Washington State University and master’s and doctoral degrees from Brigham Young University. John and I have served as full-time mission presidents accompanied by our eternal companions. Both of us were sustained as General Authorities in the Second Quorum of the Seventy in October 1992, followed by our calls to the First Quorum of the Seventy in April 1997. It has been our sweet and sacred privilege to serve side by side in the Quorums of the Seventy.

I shall be eternally grateful for the wonderful friends who brought me the glorious truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ in these latter days. How blessed is anyone with friends willing and eager to share with them the gift of the gospel, which makes possible the gift of salvation, “which gift is the greatest of all the gifts of God” (D&C 14:7). ■

### NOTE

1. See “Converts and Young Men,” *Ensign*, May 1997, 47.