

COMMENTARY — 4 MAY 2007

Approaching Mormon Doctrine

SALT LAKE CITY —

Much misunderstanding about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints revolves around its doctrine. The news media is increasingly asking what distinguishes the Church from other faiths, and reporters like to contrast one set of beliefs with another.

The Church welcomes inquisitiveness, but the challenge of understanding Mormon doctrine is not merely a matter of accessing the abundant information available. Rather, it is a matter of how this information is approached and examined.

The doctrinal tenets of any religion are best understood within a broad context, and thoughtful analysis is required to understand them. News reporters pressed by daily deadlines often find that problematic. Therefore, as the Church continues to grow throughout the world and receive increasing media attention, a few simple principles that facilitate a better understanding may be helpful:

- Not every statement made by a Church leader, past or present, necessarily constitutes doctrine. A single statement made by a single leader on a single occasion often represents a personal, though well-considered, opinion, but is not meant to be officially binding for the whole Church. With divine inspiration, the First Presidency (the prophet and his two counselors) and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (the second-highest governing body of the Church) counsel together to establish doctrine that is consistently proclaimed in official Church publications. This doctrine resides in the four “standard works” of scripture (the [Holy Bible](#), the Book of Mormon, the [Doctrine and Covenants](#) and the [Pearl of Great Price](#)), official declarations and proclamations, and the [Articles of Faith](#). Isolated statements are often taken out of context, leaving their original meaning distorted.
- Some doctrines are more important than others and might be considered core doctrines. For example, the precise location of the Garden of Eden is far less important than doctrine about Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice. The mistake that public commentators often make is taking an obscure teaching that is peripheral to the Church’s purpose and placing it at the very center. This is especially common among reporters or researchers who rely on how other Christians interpret Latter-day Saint doctrine.

Based on the scriptures, [Joseph Smith](#) declared: “The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it.”

- Because different times present different challenges, modern-day prophets receive [revelation](#) relevant to the circumstances of their day. This follows the [biblical pattern](#) ([Amos 3:7](#)), in which God communicated messages and warnings to His people through prophets in order to secure their well-being. In our day, President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910-2008) has repeatedly emphasized the importance of [the family](#) in our increasingly fractional society. In addition, the Church does not preclude future additions or changes to its teachings or practices. This living, dynamic aspect of the Church provides flexibility in meeting those challenges. According to the Articles of Faith, “We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.”
- Latter-day Saints place heavy emphasis on the application of their faith in daily life. For example, the active participation of Latter-day Saints in their community and worldwide [humanitarian programs](#) reflects concern

for other people. As Jesus Christ declared, “[By their fruits ye shall know them.](#)”

- Individual members are encouraged to independently strive to receive their own spiritual confirmation of the truthfulness of Church doctrine. Moreover, the Church exhorts all people to approach the gospel not only intellectually but with the intellect and the spirit, a process in which reason and faith [work together](#).
- Those writing or commenting on Latter-day Saint doctrine also need to understand that certain words in the [Mormon vocabulary](#) have slightly different meanings and connotations than those same words have in other religions. For example, Latter-day Saints generally view being *born again* as a *process* of conversion, whereas many other Christian denominations often view it as a conversion that happens in one defining *moment*. Sometimes what some may consider an argument or dispute over doctrine is really a misunderstanding of simple differences in terminology.

Journalists, academics and laymen alike are [encouraged](#) to pursue their inquiries into the Church by recognizing the broad and complex context within which its doctrines have been declared, in a spirit of reason and good will.

STYLE GUIDE NOTE: When reporting about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, please use the complete name of the Church in the first reference. For more information on the use of the name of the Church, go to our online [style guide](#).