

Address given to BYU Religious Education Faculty  
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## **What Is Our Doctrine?**

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We have been charged to “teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom. Teach ye diligently,” the Lord implores, “and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand” (D&C 88:77-78). But what exactly are we to teach? What is doctrine?

### **Doctrine: Its Purpose, Power, and Purity**

Doctrine is “The basic body of Christian teaching or understanding (2 Timothy 3:16). Christian doctrine is composed of teachings which are to be handed on through instruction and proclamation. . . . Religious doctrine deals with the ultimate and most comprehensive questions.”<sup>1</sup> Further, “Gospel doctrine is synonymous with the truths of salvation. It comprises the tenets, teachings, and true theories found in the scriptures; it includes the principles, precepts, and revealed philosophies of pure religion; prophetic dogmas, maxims, and views are embraced within its folds; the Articles of Faith are part and portion of it, as is every inspired utterance of the Lord’s agents.”<sup>2</sup>

The central, saving doctrine is that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the Savior and Redeemer of humankind; that he lived, taught, healed, suffered and died for our sins; and that he

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<sup>1</sup> *Holman Bible Dictionary*, ed. Trent C. Butler (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 374.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 204.

rose from the dead the third day with a glorious, immortal, resurrected body (1 Corinthians 15:1-3; D&C 76:40-42). It was, of course, the Prophet Joseph Smith who spoke of these central truths as the fundamental principles of our religion to which all other doctrines are but appendages.<sup>3</sup>

Elder Boyd K. Packer observed: “Truth, glorious truth, proclaims there is . . . a Mediator.

Through Him mercy can be fully extended to each of us without offending the eternal law of justice. This truth is the very root of Christian doctrine. You may know much about the gospel as it branches out from there, but if you only know the branches and those branches do not touch that root, if they have been cut free from that truth, there will be no life nor substance nor redemption in them.”<sup>4</sup>

Such counsel really does point us toward that which is of most worth in sermons and in the classroom, that which should receive our greatest emphasis. There is power in doctrine, power in the word (Alma 31:5), power to heal the wounded soul (Jacob 2:8), power to transform human behavior. “True doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior,” Elder Packer taught. “The study of the doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior quicker than a study of behavior will improve behavior. That is why we stress so forcefully the study of the doctrines of the gospel.”<sup>5</sup> Elder Neal A. Maxwell also pointed out that “Doctrines believed and practiced do change and improve us, while insuring our vital access to the Spirit. Both outcomes are crucial.”<sup>6</sup>

We are under obligation to learn the doctrines, teach them properly, and bind ourselves to speak and act in harmony with them. Only in this way can we perpetuate truth in a world filled with error, avoid deception, focus on what matters most, and find joy and happiness in the

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<sup>3</sup> *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 121; cited hereafter as *TPJS*.

<sup>4</sup> *Conference Report*, April 1977, 80, emphasis added; cited hereafter as *CR*.

<sup>5</sup> *CR*, October 1986, 20.

<sup>6</sup> *One More Strain of Praise* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1999), x.

process. “I have spoken before,” President Gordon B. Hinckley stated, “about the importance of keeping the doctrine of the Church pure, and seeing that it is taught in all of our meetings. I worry about this. Small aberrations in doctrinal teaching can lead to large and evil falsehoods.”<sup>7</sup>

How do we “keep the doctrine pure”? What might we do?

1. We can teach directly from the scriptures, the standard works. The scriptures contain the mind and will and voice and word of the Lord (D&C 68:3-4) to men and women in earlier days and thus doctrine and applications that are both timely and timeless. “And all scripture given by inspiration of God, is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man [or woman] of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (JST, 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

2. We can present the doctrine in the same way the prophets in our own day present it (D&C 52:9, 36), in terms of both content and emphasis. Mormon wrote: “And it came to pass that Alma, having authority from God, organized priests; . . . and he commanded them that they should teach nothing save it were the things which he had taught” (Mosiah 18:18-19, emphasis added). “Therefore, they did assemble themselves together in different bodies, being called churches; every church having their priests and their teachers, and every priest teaching the word according as it was delivered to him by the mouth of Alma. And thus, notwithstanding there being many churches they were all one church, yea, even the church of God” (Mosiah 25:21-22, emphasis added).

3. We can pay special attention to the scriptural commentary offered by living apostles and prophets in general conference addresses; cross reference the same into our scriptures; and teach this commentary in conjunction with the scripture. For example, we can study what

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<sup>7</sup> *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1997), 620.

- Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught concerning the Parable of the Prodigal Son in the April 2002 general conference;

- Elder Robert D. Hales taught concerning the covenant of baptism in October 2000;

- Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin taught concerning the principles of fasting as found in Isaiah 58 in April 2001;

- Elder Dallin H. Oaks taught concerning conversion and “becoming,” as well as his thoughtful commentary on the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard in October 2000;

- Elder M. Russell Ballard taught concerning “Who is my neighbor” and what may be called the doctrine of inclusion in October 2001. And so forth.

4. We can teach the gospel with plainness and simplicity, focus on fundamentals, and emphasize what matters most. We do not tell all we know, nor do we teach on the edge of our knowledge. In many ways, it should be the case that the more we know, the less we teach. The Prophet Joseph Smith explained that “it is not always wise to relate all the truth. Even Jesus, the Son of God, had to refrain from doing so, and had to restrain His feelings many times for the safety of Himself and His followers, and had to conceal the righteous purposes of His heart in relation to many things pertaining to His Father’s kingdom.”<sup>8</sup>

5. We can acknowledge that there are some things we simply do not know. President Joseph F. Smith declared: “It is no discredit to our intelligence or to our integrity to say frankly in the face of a hundred speculative questions, ‘I do not know.’ One thing is certain, and that is, God has revealed enough to our understanding for our exaltation and for our happiness. Let the Saints, then, utilize what they already have; be simple and unaffected in their religion, both in

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<sup>8</sup> *TPJS*, 392.

thought and word, and they will not easily lose their bearings and be subjected to the vain philosophies of man.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Doctrinal Parameters**

Since I was appointed as a Richard L. Evans Professor, and more recently as I have begun to work with Church Public Affairs in outreach and interfaith relations, I have tried to look beneath the surface and discern the nature of the objections that so many in the religious world have toward the Latter-day Saints. To be sure, the nature of our growth poses a real threat to many; more specifically, the Christian groups resent the way we “steal their sheep.” We are not in the line of historic Christianity and thus are neither Catholic nor Protestant. We believe in scripture beyond the Bible and in continuing revelation through apostles and prophets. We do not accept the concepts concerning God, Christ, and the Godhead that grew out of the post-New Testament church councils. All of these things constitute reasons why many Protestants and Catholics label us as non-Christian. We have tried, with some success I think, to speak of ourselves as “Christian but different.” But there is another reason we are suspect, one that underlies and buttresses large amounts of anti-Mormon propaganda—namely, what they perceive to be some of our “unusual doctrines,” much of which was presented by a few Church leaders of the past.

Let me illustrate with an experience I had just a few months ago. A Baptist minister was in my office one day. We were chatting about a number of things, including doctrine. He said to me, “Bob, you people believe in such strange things!” “Like what?” I asked. “Oh, for example,”

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<sup>9</sup> *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1971), 9.

he said, “you believe in blood atonement. And that affects Utah’s insistence on retaining death by a firing squad.” I responded: “No we don’t.” “Yes you do,” he came right back. “I know of several statements by Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Jedediah Grant that teach such things.” “I’m aware of those statements,” I said. I then found myself saying something that I had never voiced before: “Yes, they were taught, but they do not represent the doctrine of our Church. We believe in the blood atonement of Jesus Christ, and that alone.” My friend didn’t skip a beat: “What do you mean they don’t represent the doctrine of your Church? They were spoken by major Church leaders.”

I explained that such statements were made, for the most part, during the time of the Mormon Reformation and they were examples of a kind of “revival rhetoric” in which the leaders of the Church were striving to “raise the bar” in terms of obedience and faithfulness. I assured him that the Church, by its own canonical standards, does not have the right or the power to take a person’s life because of disobedience or even apostasy (D&C 134:10). I read to him a passage from the Book of Mormon in which the Nephite prophets had resorted to “exceeding harshness, . . . continually reminding [the people] of death, and the duration of eternity, and the judgments and the power of God, . . . and exceedingly great plainness of speech” in order to “keep them from going down speedily to destruction” (Enos 1:23).

This seemed to satisfy him to some extent, but then he said: “Bob, many of my fellow Christians have noted how hard it is to figure out what Mormons believe. They say it’s like trying to nail jello to the wall! What do you people believe? How do you decide what is your doctrine and what is not?” I sensed that we were in the midst of a very important conversation, one that was pushing me to the limits and requiring that I do some of the deepest thinking I had done for a long time. His questions were valid. They were in no way mean-spirited. They were

not intended to entrap or embarrass me or the Church. He simply was seeking information. I said: “You’ve asked some excellent questions. Let me see what I can do to answer them.” I suggested that he consider the following three ideas:

1. The “doctrine of the Church” today has a rather narrow focus, range, and direction; central and saving doctrine is what we are called upon to teach and emphasize, not tangential and peripheral teachings.

2. Not everything that was ever spoken or written by a Church leader in the past is necessarily a part of the doctrine of the Church. Ours is a living constitution, a living tree of life, a dynamic Church (D&C 1:30). We are commanded to pay heed to the words of living oracles (D&C 90:3-5).

3. In determining whether something is a part of the doctrine of the Church, we might ask: Is it found within the four standard works? Within official declarations or proclamations? In the general handbooks or approved curriculum of the Church today? Is it discussed in general conference or other official gatherings by general Church leaders today?

A significant percentage of anti-Mormonism focuses on statements by Church leaders of the past that deal with peripheral or non-central issues. No one criticizes us for a belief in God; in the divinity of Jesus Christ or his atoning work; in the literal bodily resurrection of the Savior and the eventual resurrection of mankind; in baptism by immersion; in the gift of the Holy Ghost; the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, etc. But we are challenged regularly for statements in our literature on such matters as the following:

- God’s life before he was God;
- how Jesus was conceived;
- the specific fate of sons of perdition;

- teachings about Adam as God;
- details concerning what it means to become like God hereafter;
- that plural marriage is essential to one's exaltation;
- why Blacks were denied the priesthood prior to 1978, etc.

### **Loyalty to Men Called as Prophets**

While we love the scriptures and thank God regularly for them, we believe that one can have sufficient confidence and even reverence for holy writ without believing that every word between Genesis 1:1 and Revelation 22:21 is the word for word dictation of the Almighty or that the Bible now reads as it has always read. Indeed, our own scriptures attest that plain and precious truths and many covenants of the Lord were taken away or kept back from the Bible before it was compiled (1 Nephi 13:20-29; Moses 1:40-41; Articles of Faith 1:8).<sup>10</sup> But we still cherish the sacred volume, recognize and teach the doctrines of salvation within it, and seek to pattern our lives according to its timeless teachings.

In like manner, we can sustain with all our hearts the prophets and apostles without believing that they are perfect or that everything they say or do is exactly what God wants said and done. In short, we do not believe in apostolic or prophetic infallibility. Moses made mistakes, but we love and sustain him and accept his writings nonetheless. Peter made mistakes, but we still honor him and study his words. Paul made mistakes, but we admire his boldness and dedication and treasure his epistles. James pointed out that Elijah “was a man subject to like passions as we are” (James 5:17), and the Prophet Joseph Smith taught that “a prophet [is] a

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<sup>10</sup> Compare *TPJS*, 9-10, 61, 327.



prophet only when he [is] acting as such.”<sup>11</sup> On another occasion the Prophet declared: “I told them I was but a man, and they must not expect me to be perfect; if they expected perfection from me, I should expect it from them; but if they would bear with my infirmities and the infirmities of the brethren, I would likewise bear with their infirmities.”<sup>12</sup> “I can fellowship the President of the Church,” said Lorenzo Snow, “if he does not know everything I know. . . . I saw the . . . imperfections in [Joseph Smith]. . . . I thanked God that he would put upon a man who had those imperfections the power and authority he placed upon him. . . for I knew that I myself had weakness, and I thought there was a chance for me.”<sup>13</sup>

As we have been reminded again and again, whom God calls, God qualifies. That is, God calls his prophets. He empowers and strengthens the individual, provides an eternal perspective, loosens his tongue and enables him to make known divine truth. But being called as an apostle or even as president of the Church does not remove the man from mortality or make him perfect. President David O. McKay explained that “when God makes the prophet He does not unmake the man.”<sup>14</sup> “I was this morning introduced to a man from the east,” Joseph Smith stated. “After hearing my name, he remarked that I was nothing but a man, indicating by this expression, that he had supposed that a person to whom the Lord would see fit to reveal his will, must be something more than a man. He seemed to have forgotten the saying that fell from the lips of James, that [Elijah] was a man subject to like passions as we are, yet he had such power with God, that he, in answer to his prayers, shut the heavens that they gave no rain for the space of three years and six months.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *TPJS*, 278.

<sup>12</sup> *TPJS*, 268.

<sup>13</sup> Cited by Neal A. Maxwell, in *CR*, October 1984, 10.

<sup>14</sup> *CR*, October 1912, 121.

<sup>15</sup> *TPJS*, 89.

“With all their inspiration and greatness,” Elder Bruce R. McConkie declared, “prophets are yet mortal men with imperfections common to mankind in general. They have their opinions and prejudices and are left to work out their problems without inspiration in many instances.”<sup>16</sup> “Thus the opinions and views, even of a prophet, may contain error, unless those opinions and views were inspired by the Spirit. . . . Paul was one of the greatest theologian-prophets of all the ages, but he had some opinions that were not in complete accord with the Lord’s feelings and he wrote some of them down in his epistles, but being wise and discreet he labeled them as such. He said, ‘This is what I think.’ . . .

“We even have one of these instances in the Book of Mormon, one where Alma had some personal views on the resurrection [see Alma 40:17-20]. He labeled it as opinion when he wrote it down, and we can stretch and twist and manage to make his personal view conform with what is true, since we have had revelation that tells us what is true on the point. But if we did not have latter-day revelation, it would not be clear.”<sup>17</sup>

“There have been times,” Elder Harold B. Lee pointed out, “when even the President of the Church has not been moved upon by the Holy Ghost. There is, I suppose you’d say, a classic story of Brigham Young in the time when Johnston’s army was on the move. The Saints were all inflamed, and President Young had his feelings whetted to fighting pitch. He stood up in the morning session of General Conference and preached a sermon vibrant with defiance at the approaching army, declaring an intention to oppose them and drive them back. In the afternoon he rose and said that Brigham Young had been talking in the morning but the Lord was going to talk now. He then delivered an address the tempo of which was the exact opposite of the morning

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<sup>16</sup> *Mormon Doctrine*, 608.

<sup>17</sup> Bruce R. McConkie, “Are the General Authorities Human?” address delivered at the Institute of Religion Forum at the University of Utah, 28 October 1966.

sermon. Whether that happened or not, it illustrates a principle: that the Lord can move upon his people but they may speak on occasions their own opinions.”<sup>18</sup>

In 1865 the First Presidency counseled the Latter-day Saints: “We do not wish incorrect and unsound doctrines to be handed down to posterity under the sanction of great names, to be received and valued by future generations as authentic and reliable, creating labor and difficulties for our successors to perform and contend with, which we ought not to transmit to them. The interests of posterity are, to a certain extent, in our hands. Errors in history and in doctrine, if left uncorrected by us who are conversant with the events, and who are in a position to judge of the truth or falsity of the doctrines, would go to our children as though we had sanctioned and endorsed them. . . . We know what sanctity there is always attached to the writings of men who have passed away, especially to the writings of Apostles, when none of their contemporaries are left, and we, therefore, feel the necessity of being watchful upon these points.”<sup>19</sup>

President Gordon B. Hinckley stated: “I have worked with seven Presidents of this Church. I have recognized that all have been human. But I have never been concerned over this. They may have had some weaknesses. But this has never troubled me. I know that the God of heaven has used mortal men throughout history to accomplish His divine purposes.”<sup>20</sup> On another occasion President Hinckley pleaded with the Saints that “as we continue our search for truth . . . we look for strength and goodness rather than weakness and foibles in those who did so great a work in their time. We recognize that our forebears were human. They doubtless made mistakes. . . . There was only one perfect man who ever walked the earth. The Lord has used imperfect people in the process of building his perfect society. If some of them occasionally

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<sup>18</sup> *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 542.

<sup>19</sup> Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, Daniel H. Wells, in *Messages of the First Presidency*, 6 vols., comp. James R. Clark (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965-75), 2:232.

stumbled, or if their characters may have been slightly flawed in one way or another, the wonder is the greater that they accomplished so much.”<sup>21</sup>

Prophets are men called of God to serve as covenant spokesmen for his children on earth, and thus one should never take lightly what they say. The early Brethren of this dispensation were the living prophets for their contemporaries, and much of what we believe and practice today rests upon the doctrinal foundation they laid. But the work of the Restoration is a work in progress, a gradual unfolding and clarifying and refining of the word and will of the Almighty. Some years ago my colleague Joseph McConkie remarked to a group of religious educators: “We have the scholarship of the early brethren to build upon; we have the advantage of additional history; we have inched our way up the mountain of our destiny and now stand in a position to see things with greater clarity than did they. . . . We live in finer houses than did our pioneer forefathers, but this does not argue that we are better or that our rewards will be greater. In like manner our understanding of gospel principles should be better housed, and we should constantly be seeking to make it so. There is no honor in our reading by oil lamps when we have been granted better light.”<sup>22</sup> Thus it is important to note that ultimately the Lord will hold us responsible for the teachings and direction and focus provided by the living oracles of our own day, both in terms of their commentary upon canonized scripture, as well as the living scripture that is delivered through them by the power of the Holy Ghost (D&C 68:3-4).

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<sup>20</sup> *CR*, April 1992, 77.

<sup>21</sup> “The Continuous Pursuit of Truth,” *Ensign*, April 1986, 5.

<sup>22</sup> “The Gathering of Israel and the Return of Christ,” the Sixth Annual Church Educational System Religious Educators’ Symposium, August 1982, Brigham Young University, typescript, 3, 5.

## **Facing Hard Issues**

My experience for the last twenty years at BYU, and particularly my more recent work in outreach, teaches me that anti-Mormonism will probably continue to increase in volume, at least until the Savior returns and shuts down the presses. Because we believe in the apostasy and the need for a restoration of the fullness of the gospel, we will never be fully accepted by those who claim to have all the truth they need in the Bible. But I want to note two things about anti-Mormonism that my work with those of other faiths has taught me. First, anti-Mormon material definitely affects more than those who are not Latter-day Saints. Not only does it in some cases deter or frighten curious or interested investigators, but it also troubles far more members of the Church than I had previously realized. I must receive ten phone calls, letters, or e-mails per week from members throughout the Church asking hard questions that have been raised by their neighbors or by some literature they read. A short time ago a young man (married, with a family) phoned me in late afternoon, excused himself for the interruption, and then proceeded to tell me that he was teetering on the edge of leaving the Church because of his doubts. He posed several questions, and I responded to each one and bore my testimony. After about a half hour chat, he offered profound thanks and indicated that he felt he would be okay now. Such an experience is not uncommon. I guess what I'm saying is that antagonistic materials are here to stay and are affecting adversely both Latter-day Saints and the attitudes of those of other faiths.

Second, very often the critics of the Church simply use our own stuff against us. They don't need to create new material; they simply dig up and repackage what some of our own Church leaders have said in the past that would not be considered a part of the doctrine of the Church today. Latter-day Saints are eager to sustain and uphold their leaders. Consequently, we are especially hesitant to suggest that something taught by Brigham Young or Orson Pratt or

Orson Hyde might not be in harmony with the truth as God has made it known to us “line upon line, precept upon precept” (Isaiah 28:10; 2 Nephi 28:30).

Some time ago a colleague and I were in southern California speaking to a group of about 500 people, both Latter-day Saint and Protestant. During the question and answer phase of the program, someone asked the inevitable: “Are you really Christian? Do you, as many claim, worship a different Jesus?” I explained that we worship the Christ of the New Testament, that we believe wholeheartedly in his virgin birth, his divine Sonship, his miracles, his transforming teachings, his atoning sacrifice, and his bodily resurrection from the dead. I added that we also believe in the teachings of and about Christ found in the Book of Mormon and modern revelation. After the meeting an LDS woman came up to me and said: “You didn’t tell the truth about what we believe!” Startled, I asked: “What do you mean?” She responded: “You said we believe in the virgin birth of Christ, and you know very well that we don’t believe that.” “Yes we do,” I retorted. She then said with a great deal of emotion: “I want to believe you, but people have told me for years that we believe that God the Father had sexual relations with Mary and thereby Jesus was conceived.” I looked her in the eyes and said: “I’m aware of that teaching, but that is not the doctrine of the Church. Have you ever heard the Brethren teach it in conference? Is it in the standard works, the curricular materials, or the handbooks of the Church? Is it a part of an official declaration or proclamation?” I watched as a 500-pound weight seemed to come off her shoulders, as tears came into her eyes, and she simply said: “Thank you, Brother Millet.”

Not long ago, Pastor Greg Johnson and I met with an Evangelical Christian church in Sandy, Utah. The minister there asked us to come and make a presentation (“An Evangelical and a Latter-day Saint in Dialogue”) that Greg and I have made several times before in different parts of the country. The whole purpose of our presentation is to model the kind of relationships

people with differing religious views can have. This kind of presentation has proven, in my estimation, to be one of the most effective bridge-building exercises in which I have been involved.

On this particular night, the first question asked by someone in the audience was on DNA and the Book of Mormon. I made a brief comment and indicated that a more detailed (and informed) response would be forthcoming soon in a journal article from a BYU biologist. There were many, many hands in the air at this point. I called on a woman close to the front of the church. Her question was: “How do you deal with the Adam-God doctrine?” I responded: “Thank you for that question. It gives me an opportunity to explain a principle early in our exchange that will lay the foundation for other things to be said. I took a few moments to address the question, “What is our doctrine?” I indicated if some teaching or idea was not in the standard works, not among official declarations or proclamations, not in the general handbooks or official curriculum of the Church, or was not taught currently by living apostles or prophets in general conference or other official gatherings, it is probably not a part of the doctrine of the Church. Even if something was said once or even several times by Church leaders of the past, if it does not meet the above criteria, it is not the doctrine of the Church.

I was surprised when my pastor friend then said to the group: “Are you listening to Bob? Do you hear what he is saying? This is important! It’s time for us to stop criticizing Latter-day Saints on matters they don’t even accept as doctrine.” At this point in the meeting, two things happened: first, the number of hands of questioners went down, and second, the tone of the meeting changed quite dramatically. The questions were not baiting or challenging ones, but rather efforts to clarify. For example, the last question asked was by a middle-aged man. He stood up and said: “I for one would like to thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for what you

have done here tonight. This thrills my soul. I think this is what Jesus would do. I have lived in Utah for many years, and I have many LDS friends. We get along okay; we don't fight and quarrel over religious matters. But we really don't talk with one another about the things that matter most to us, that is, our faith. I don't plan to become a Latter-day Saint, and I'm certain my Mormon friends don't plan to become Evangelical, but I would like to find more effective ways to talk heart to heart. Could you two make a few suggestions on how we can deepen and sweeten our relationships with our LDS neighbors?"

At that point I sensed that we had somehow gotten through to some of the audience. Richard Mouw, one of my Evangelical friends, has suggested the need for "convicted civility," the challenge to be true to our own faith and not compromise one whit of our doctrine and way of life, and at the same time strive to better understand and respect our neighbors who are of another religious persuasion.<sup>23</sup> These experiences highlight for me the challenge we face. I have no hesitation telling an individual or a group "I don't know" when I am asked why men are ordained to the priesthood and women are not; why Blacks were denied the blessings of the priesthood for almost a century and a half; and several other matters that have neither been revealed nor clarified by those holding the proper keys. The difficulty comes when someone in the past has spoken on these matters, has put forward ideas that are out of harmony with what we know and teach today, and when those teachings are still available, either in print or among the everyday conversations of the members, and have never been corrected. The question underlying all of this is simply "What is Our Doctrine?" If we could somehow help the Saints (and the larger religious world) know the answer to that question, it would enhance our proselyting effort, our convert retention, our activation, and the image and overall strength of the Church. If presented

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<sup>23</sup> See *Uncommon Decency* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992).



properly, it need not weaken faith or create doubts. It could do much to focus the Saints more and more on the central, saving verities of the gospel.

### **Further Illustrations**

We discussed earlier that one of the ways to keep our doctrine pure is to present the gospel message the way the prophets and apostles today present it. Similarly, our explanations of certain “hard doctrines” or deeper doctrines should not go beyond what the prophets believe and teach today. Let’s take two illustrations. The first is an extremely sensitive matter, one that does now affect and will yet affect in the future the quantity and quality of convert baptisms in the Church. I speak of the matter of the Blacks and the priesthood. I was raised in the Church, just as many of you were and was well aware of the priesthood restriction. For as long as I can remember, the explanation for why our black brethren and sisters were denied the full blessings of the priesthood (including the temple) was some variation of the theme that they had been less valiant in the premortal life and thus had come to earth under a curse, an explanation that has been perpetuated as doctrine for most of our Church’s history. I had committed to memory early on the article of our faith that states that men and women will be punished for their own sins and not for Adam’s transgression (Articles of Faith 1:2) and later read that “the sins of the fathers cannot be answered upon the heads of the children” (Moses 6:54), but I had assumed that these principles somehow did not apply to the Blacks.

In June of 1978 everything changed—not just the matter of who could or could not be ordained to the priesthood, but also the nature of the explanation for why the restriction had been in place from the beginning. Elder Dallin H. Oaks, in a 1988 interview, was asked: “As much as any doctrine the Church has espoused, or controversy the Church has been embroiled in, this one

[the priesthood restriction] seems to stand out. Church members seemed to have less to go on to get a grasp of the issue. Can you address why this was the case, and what can be learned from it?" In response, Elder Oaks stated that "If you read the scriptures with this question in mind, 'Why did the Lord command this or why did he command that,' you find that in less than one in a hundred commands was any reason given. It's not the pattern of the Lord to give reasons. We can put reason to revelation. We can put reasons to commandments. When we do we're on our own. Some people put reasons to the one we're talking about here, and they turned out to be spectacularly wrong. There is a lesson in that. The lesson I've drawn from that [is that] I decided a long time ago that I had faith in the command and I had no faith in the reasons that had been suggested for it."

Then came a follow-up question: "Are you referring to reasons given even by general authorities?" Elder Oaks answered: "Sure. I'm referring to reasons given by general authorities and reasons elaborated upon that reason by others. The whole set of reasons seemed to me to be unnecessary risk-taking. . . . Let's don't make the mistake that's been made in the past, here and in other areas, trying to put reasons to revelation. The reasons turn out to be man-made to a great extent. The revelations are what we sustain as the will of the Lord and that's where safety lies."<sup>24</sup>

In other words, we really do not know why the restriction on the priesthood existed. "I don't know" is the correct answer when we are asked "Why?" The priesthood was restricted "for reasons which we believe are known to God, but which he has not made fully known to man."<sup>25</sup> I have come to realize that this is what Elder McConkie meant in his August 1978 address to the Church Educational System when he counseled us to "Forget everything that I have said, or what President Brigham Young or President George Q. Cannon or whosoever has said in days past

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<sup>24</sup> *Provo Daily Herald*, 5 June 1988, 21.

that is contrary to the present revelation. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world.

“We get our truth and our light line upon line and precept upon precept. We have now had added a new flood of intelligence and light on this particular subject, and it erases all the darkness and all the views and all the thoughts of the past. They don’t matter any more. . . . It is a new day and a new arrangement, and the Lord has now given the revelation that sheds light out into the world on this subject. As to any slivers of light or any particles of darkness of the past, we forget about them.”<sup>26</sup>

It seems to me, therefore, that we as Latter-day Saints have two problems to solve in making the restored gospel available more extensively to people of color: First, we need to have our hearts and minds purified of all pride and prejudice. Second, we need to correct a doctrinal error that exists in the minds of most members of the Church concerning this matter of priesthood restriction; we need to dismiss all previous explanations for the restriction and indicate that while we simply do not know why the restriction existed before, the fullness of the blessings of the restored gospel are now available to all who prepare themselves to receive them. Elder M. Russell Ballard observed that “We don’t know all of the reasons why the Lord does what he does. We need to be content that someday we’ll fully understand it.”<sup>27</sup>

Now to the second illustration. I think that I have never opened myself to questions before a group of persons not of our faith that I have not been asked about our doctrine of God and the Godhead, particularly concerning the teachings of Joseph Smith and Lorenzo Snow. I generally do not have too much difficulty explaining our view of how through the Atonement

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<sup>25</sup> David O. McKay, Hugh B. Brown, N. Eldon Tanner, First Presidency Message, January 1970.

<sup>26</sup> *Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1981), 132.

<sup>27</sup> Spoken at Elijah Abel Memorial Service; reported in *Church News*, 5 October 2002, 12.

man can eventually become like God, become more and more Christlike. For that matter, Orthodox Christianity, a huge segment of the Christian world, still holds to a view of human deification. The Bible itself teaches that men and women may become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4), “joint heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17), gain “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16), and become perfect, even as our Father in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:48). The Apostle John declared: “Beloved, now are we the [children] of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). Perhaps more important, this doctrine is taught powerfully in modern revelation (D&C 76:58; 132:19-20).

The tougher issue for other Christians to deal with is the accompanying doctrine set forth in the King Follett Sermon<sup>28</sup> and the Lorenzo Snow couplet<sup>29</sup>—namely, that God was once a man. Latter-day scriptures state unequivocally that God is a man, a Man of Holiness (Moses 6:57) who possesses a body of flesh and bones (D&C 130:22). These concepts are clearly a part of the doctrinal restoration. We teach that man is not of a lower order or different species than God. This, of course, makes many of our Christian friends extremely nervous (if not angry), for it appears to them that we are lowering God in the scheme of things and thus attempting to bridge the Creator/creature chasm.

I suppose all we can say in response is that we know what we know as a result of modern revelation, and that from our perspective the distance between God and man is still tremendous, almost infinite. Our Father in heaven is indeed omnipotent, omniscient, and, by the power of his Holy Spirit, omnipresent. He is a gloried, exalted, resurrected being, “the only supreme governor and independent being in whom all fullness and perfection dwell; . . . in him every good gift and

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<sup>28</sup> *TPJS*, 345-46.

every good principle dwell; . . . he is the Father of lights; in him the principle of faith dwells independently, and he is the object in whom the faith of all other rational and accountable beings center for life and salvation.”<sup>30</sup> Modern revelation attests that the Almighty sits enthroned “with glory, honor, power, majesty, might, dominion, truth, justice, judgment, mercy, and an infinity of fullness” (D&C 109:77).

And what do we know beyond the fact that God is an exalted Man? What do we know of his mortal existence? What do we know of the time before he became God? Nothing. The following is the report of the interview between President Gordon B. Hinckley and Richard Ostling of *Time* magazine:

Ostling: “Was God the Father once a man as we are?”

President Hinckley: “I don’t know that we teach it. I don’t know that we emphasize it. I haven’t heard it discussed for a long time in public discourse. I don’t know all the circumstances under which that statement was made. I understand the philosophical background behind it, but I don’t know a lot about it, and I don’t think others know a lot about it.”<sup>31</sup> I submit that President Hinckley was being both direct and honest: we really do not know more than what was stated by the Prophet Joseph Smith, and that is precious little. Insights concerning God’s life before Godhood are not found in the standard works, in official declarations or proclamations, in current handbooks or curricular materials, nor are doctrinal expositions on the subject delivered in general conference today. This topic is not what we would call a central and saving doctrine, one that must be believed (or understood) in order to hold a temple recommend or be in good standing in the Church. Soon after this interview, President Hinckley stated in general

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<sup>29</sup> *Teachings of Lorenzo Snow*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 1.

<sup>30</sup> *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1985), 2:2.

<sup>31</sup> In Richard N. and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America* (San Francisco: Harper, 1999), 296.

conference: “I personally have been much quoted, and in a few instances misquoted and misunderstood. I think that’s to be expected. None of you need worry because you read something that was incompletely reported. You need not worry that I do not understand some matters of doctrine. I think I understand them thoroughly, and it is unfortunate that the reporting may not make this clear. I hope you will never look to the public press as the authority on the doctrines of the Church.”<sup>32</sup>

This latter illustration highlights an important point: a teaching may be true and yet not a part of the doctrine of the Church. Whether it is true or not may in fact be irrelevant, if indeed the Brethren do not teach it today or it is not taught directly in the standard works or found in our correlated curriculum. As we have indicated, even if something was stated or suggested by a president of the Church or an apostle on one occasion, it still may not be doctrine. For example, was Jesus married? The scriptures do not provide an answer. “We do not know anything about Jesus Christ being married,” President Charles W. Penrose stated. “The Church has no authoritative declaration on the subject.”<sup>33</sup> So whether he was or was not is not part of the doctrine of the Church. It would be well for us to apply the following lesson from President Harold B. Lee: “With respect to doctrines and meanings of scriptures, let me give you a safe counsel. It is usually not well to use a single passage of scripture [or, I would add, a single sermon] in proof of a point of doctrine unless it is confirmed by modern revelation or by the Book of Mormon. . . . To single out a passage of scripture to prove a point, unless it is [so] confirmed . . . is always a hazardous thing.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *CR*, October 1997, 3.

<sup>33</sup> “Editor’s Table,” *Improvement Era*, September 1912, 1042.

<sup>34</sup> *Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, 157.

## Conclusion

There is a very real sense in which we as Latter-day Saints are spoiled. We have been given so much, have had so much knowledge dispensed from on high relative to the nature of God, Christ, man, the Plan of Salvation, and the overall purpose of life here and the glory to be had hereafter, that we are prone to expect to have all of the answers to all of the questions of life. Elder Neal A. Maxwell pointed out that “the exhilarations of discipleship exceed its burdens. Hence, while journeying through our Sinai, we are nourished in the Bountiful-like oases of the Restoration. Of these oases some of our first impressions may prove to be more childish than definitive. . . . In our appreciation, little wonder some of us mistake a particular tree for the whole of an oasis, or a particularly refreshing pool for the entirety of the Restoration’s gushing and living waters. Hence, in our early exclamations there may even be some unintended exaggerations. We have seen and partaken of far too much; hence, we ‘cannot [speak] the smallest part [which] we feel’ (Alma 26:16).”<sup>35</sup>

We have much, to be sure, but there are indeed “many great and important things pertaining to the kingdom of God” yet to come forth (Articles of Faith 1:9). The Lord stated to Joseph Smith in Nauvoo: “I deign to reveal unto my church things which have been kept hid from before the foundation of the world, things that pertain to the dispensation of the fulness of times” (D&C 124:41; compare 121:26; 128:18). As Elder Oaks observed, we have been given many of the commands but not all of the reasons why, many of the directives but not all of the explanations. I state to my classes regularly that it is as important for us to know what we do not know as it is for us to know what we know. Far too many things are taught or discussed or even

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<sup>35</sup> CR, April 1996, 94-95.

argued about that fit into the realm of the unrevealed and thus the unresolved. Such matters, particularly if they do not fall within that range of revealed truth we call the doctrine of the Church, do not edify or inspire. Often, very often, they lead to confusion and sow discord.

This does not in any way mean that we should not seek to study and grow and expand in our gospel understanding. Peter explained that there needs to be a reason for the hope within us (1 Peter 3:15). Our knowledge should be as settling to the mind as it is soothing to the heart. Elder Maxwell taught that some “Church members know just enough about the doctrines to converse superficially on them, but their scant knowledge about the deep doctrines is inadequate for deep discipleship (See 1 Corinthians 2:10). Thus uninformed about the deep doctrines, they make no deep change in their lives.”<sup>36</sup> President Hugh B. Brown once observed: “I am impressed with the testimony of a man who can stand and say he knows the gospel is true. But I would like to ask is ‘But, sir, do you know the gospel?’ . . . “Mere testimony can be gained with but perfunctory knowledge of the Church and its teachings. . . . But to retain a testimony, to be of service in building the Lord’s kingdom, requires a serious study of the gospel and knowing what it is.”<sup>37</sup> Once again, however, the issue is one of focus, one of emphasis—where we choose to spend our time when we teach the gospel to both Latter-day Saints and to those of other faiths.

There is a valid reason why it is difficult to “tie down” Latter-day Saint doctrine, one that derives from the very nature of the Restoration. The fact that God continues to speak through his anointed servants; the fact that He, through those servants, continues to reveal, elucidate and clarify what has already been given; and the fact that our canon of scripture is open, flexible, and

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<sup>36</sup> *Men and Women of Christ* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 2.

<sup>37</sup> Personal correspondence to Robert J. Matthews, 28 January 1969; cited in Matthews, “Using the Scriptures,” *1981 Brigham Young University Fireside and Devotional Speeches* (Provo: BYU Press, 1981), 124.



expanding—all of this militates against what many in the Christian world would call a systematic theology.

It is the declaration of sound and solid doctrine, the doctrine found in scripture and taught regularly by Church leaders, that builds faith and strengthens testimony and commitment to the Lord and his kingdom. Elder Maxwell explained that “Deeds do matter as well as doctrines, but the doctrines can move us to do the deeds, and the Spirit can help us to understand the doctrines as well as prompt us to do the deeds.”<sup>38</sup> He also noted that “When weary legs falter and detours and roadside allurements entice, the fundamental doctrines will summon from deep within us fresh determination. Extraordinary truths can move us to extraordinary accomplishments.”<sup>39</sup>

The teaching and application of sound doctrine are great safeguards to us in these last days, shields against the fiery darts of the adversary. Understanding true doctrine and being true to that doctrine can keep us from ignorance, from error, and from sin. The Apostle Paul counseled Timothy: “If thou put the brethren [and sisters] in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the word of faith and of good doctrine whereunto thou hast attained. . . . Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.” (1 Timothy 4:6, 13.)

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<sup>38</sup> *That My Family Should Partake* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1974), 87.

<sup>39</sup> *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1979), 4.