

To Know Thee, the Only True God

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In preparing my remarks for today, I could not help remembering a recent experience of mine.

Some months ago, I enjoyed the privilege of presiding at a stake conference alongside Elder Donald J. Keyes, one of our noble Area Seventies. During the course of the Saturday evening session—often one of the highlights of a stake conference—we were required to adjust our program at short notice because of the inclusion of some additional speakers. In view of the fact that a duet, sung by a young couple, was to be moved in the program to follow Elder Keyes’s remarks and precede mine, I accordingly quietly whispered the proposed change in the program to him.

After doing so, it was quickly apparent that he had not fully grasped what I had just said, which required me to repeat my message a second time. Unfortunately, this time, and to my dismay, his lack of understanding was now amplified by a look of incredulity and utter disbelief. Realizing now that I had somehow failed in my attempt to clearly convey the change in our program, I repeated my message in a manner that could not be mistaken: I said, and this time more clearly and slowly than I had done previously, but with some added

emphasis, “Don, the duet will be sung between you and me!”

This time my message hit the mark, for now his incredulity and disbelief were replaced by a nervous giggle and a hint of terror.

I then reviewed carefully in my mind what I had just said and at last realized my terrible error: When I had said, “The duet will be sung between us,” he had taken my words literally. In other words, he had understood that the duet would be sung by the two of us!

I am pleased to reassure all of you here today that neither I, nor President Samuelson, have any intention of singing any duet, anywhere, at anytime, to anyone!

My beloved brothers and sisters, it is truly a rare privilege to be in your presence today. As I speak, our children and their families are viewing this broadcast in our home, back in South Africa, where it is just after eight o’ clock in the evening. Just think about the power of modern technology! One day, when I am released from this calling, Diane and I expect to sit alongside

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our children in our home in Featherbrooke, South Africa, and continue to enjoy the blessings of these great gatherings via satellite broadcast.

I am pleased to convey the love and greetings of the First Presidency to you. Alongside your parents and loved ones, the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, as stewards of the keys of the kingdom of God, have a deep interest in you and an abiding faith in your progress and development.

When one considers the glorious work of the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ, nothing surpasses in importance and power the restoration of a true knowledge and understanding of God the Eternal Father and His Son, our Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ. In the world in which we now live, faith in a real and living God is in steep decline. The very existence and mission of Jesus Christ is being diluted by so-called believers—some who now ascribe to a belief that Jesus Christ was a great moral teacher at best and a good man with some flaws at the very least. In contrast, the theology of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints stands fast as a beacon of undiluted testimony in the living reality of God, our Eternal Father, and His Son, Jesus Christ. We believe the holy scriptures as they have fallen from the lips of holy prophets, and we also believe in continued revelation as it comes to us through authorized and inspired latter-day prophets and apostles. We are not “tossed to and fro . . . with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive.”¹

In this regard, the singular importance of the First Vision and the Prophet Joseph Smith’s firsthand witness of the Father and the Son are wonderfully echoed in the Savior’s Intercessory Prayer, as recorded in chapter 17 of the Gospel of John. In this prayer of prayers, which the Son of God offered on the eve of His

Atonement, the Lord declared, “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.”²

In our discussion this morning we will consider two principles that are fundamental to our faith. The first is a correct *understanding* of God. The second applies to our *relationship* with God.

The Nature of God

A. Background

In regard to the actual existence and correct understanding of God, I will simply note here that it is hard to imagine any concept or idea that has been more misunderstood, distorted, or abused during the past 2,000 years. To many, God is mystical and distant; to others, He is nothing more than a manifestation of nature around us; to still others, He is a spirit who reigns in terrible power and judgment; and to a few, God is the invention of a childlike, unimproved mind. The diversity of beliefs is truly bewildering and baffling.

I will provide here only one example among the countless of how differently God is viewed even among those within Christianity itself. Aristides, the second-century Christian apologist, declared:

*God is not born, nor made. . . . He is immortal, perfect, and incomprehensible. . . . He has no name, for everything that has a name is related to created things. He has no form, nor any bodily members [or limbs]. . . . He is neither male nor female.*³

I shall not comment specifically on Aristides’ description of God. But I cannot forego the moment to simply say that Aristides’ statement is much falsehood speckled with some truth. Even when acknowledging the fact that he lived during the second century when the early Church was already in apostasy, one has to say that his statement does not conform to the Old Testament nor the Gospels and the

apostolic epistles that were reasonably well in circulation among the early Christians during Aristides' day.⁴

B. The First Vision and Revealed Knowledge of the Nature of God

It is important to realize that the restoration of the true knowledge of God, and therefore of our Heavenly Father and His Son, *preceded* the restoration of any laws, ordinances, or principles that had to be once again restored in connection with this, the dispensation of the fulness of times.

There is something wondrous about the faith and the purity of the boy Joseph Smith in the spring of 1820 as he entered the grove of trees with a prayer in his heart. He enquired as to which of all the religious parties and sects were right so that he could know which one to join⁵ because of his deep concern for the welfare of his immortal soul.⁶

Beyond Joseph Smith's brief but deeply spiritual account, the earnest reader is drawn into this event in a very personal manner. We sense something of the glorious appearance of God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. We hear the Father call Joseph by name while turning to His Beloved Son. We hear the Son, as our Savior and Redeemer and Advocate with the Father, address Joseph. Throughout the account we sense the reality, nearness, and approachableness of our Heavenly Father and His Son, and we are renewed in our testimony that God is real and mighty to save.

After the First Vision, other manifestations followed that caused the Book of Mormon to come forth and the necessary priesthood authority, covenants, and ordinances to be restored. In short, all of the power and knowledge necessary for gaining eternal life was once again restored to mankind—but only after the true nature of the Father and the Son had been revealed.

The Prophet Joseph was later to testify with unusual authority, "It is the first principle

of the Gospel to know [with] a certainty the Character of God, and to know that we [can] converse with him as one man converses with another."⁷

Our Relationship with God

A. Background

In regard to our relationship with God, which is the second fundamental principle that we will consider here today, I refer to one false doctrine, the doctrine of predestination, that should be sufficient for our purposes. This doctrine was expanded upon by the fifth-century Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo and has governed mainstream Christianity for many centuries. According to predestination, the destiny of any soul is predetermined by God, *before* any act, good or evil, has been committed by any man or woman.⁸

I will only say here that there is a terrible logic to a belief in a God who prejudices us, even when His judgment is always perfect. There is also the depressing arithmetic of a teaching that holds that nothing we do, or ever will do in the future, will influence God's grace or deflect His justice: we are thereby left with our final fate fixed, because of God's prejudgment of us. Any thoughtful believer will readily discern the self-defeating potential of this incorrect doctrine of predestination, as well as the hopelessness it could produce in individuals. It is therefore not surprising that much of mankind over the ages have approached God with great fear and trepidation.

In this regard I refer to the well-known example of Martin Luther, the great reformer. When he was a young man, before he had embarked on the ministry as a monk and some years before his work as a reformer, he had two experiences that greatly affected him. The first of these events occurred in 1503, when a dagger pierced his leg, rupturing an artery, which could have caused him an untimely death. The second event occurred two years later, in 1505. He was caught in a heavy thunderstorm

that was so violent that he felt sure he was not going to survive. It was this latter event, in fact, which caused Luther to promise that he would become a monk if his life were spared. However, the most telling part in both of these life-threatening events was that Luther, when in fear of his life, did not once call upon the Lord for help. Instead, and from the Latter-day Saint point of view, quite surprisingly, he called upon two venerated saints for help. In the first instance, when his leg was injured, he implored Mary, the mortal mother of the Savior, to help him. In the second event, during the terrifying thunderstorm, he turned his calls for help to Saint Anne, who is believed to have been the mother of this same Mary. In later years Luther regretted his behavior for not calling upon the Lord during these situations.⁹

One possible reason for a good man like Martin Luther not to have turned to His Heavenly Father is found in what he said at one time: “If I could believe that God was not angry at me, I would stand on my head for joy.”¹⁰ We should also remember that Martin Luther was not unique in these views; in fact, they were typical in a society in which man feared God and stood in terror of Christ as our judge.¹¹

B. The Restoration Provides the Correct Understanding of Our Relationship with God

Let’s now consider our understanding of our relationship with God as Latter-day Saints.

I begin with this inspired comment by the Prophet Joseph: “If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves.”¹²

Through glorious principles once again restored, we are taught that the Fatherhood of God, our Father, predates mortality. He is literally our Heavenly Father—in other words, the Father of our spirits. The Savior Jesus Christ is, therefore, in the literal sense of the word, our Elder Brother, as the firstborn spirit child of God the Father.¹³

This vital understanding entirely changes the nature of our relationship with God. The Savior’s recurring expressions during His mortal ministry now more fully resonate with us. Just think for a moment about the following expressions:

“*Our* Father which art in heaven . . .”¹⁴

“Be ye therefore perfect, even as *your* Father which is in heaven is perfect.”¹⁵

“I ascend unto my Father, and *your* Father; and to my God, and *your* God.”¹⁶

We are reminded of the prophetic declaration by modern-day prophets and apostles in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” which declares:

All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.

*In the premortal realm, spirit sons and daughters knew and worshiped God as their Eternal Father and accepted His plan by which His children could obtain a physical body and gain earthly experience to progress toward perfection and ultimately realize his or her divine destiny as an heir of eternal life. The divine plan of happiness enables family relationships to be perpetuated beyond the grave. Sacred ordinances and covenants available in holy temples make it possible for individuals to return to the presence of God and for families to be united eternally.*¹⁷

Because of the Restoration and because of a true and fuller understanding of mankind’s origin and destiny, we know that we are *not* predestined to anything. Each one of us is in fact *foreordained* unto salvation and exaltation. The undergirding principle of foreordination is quite simple: every soul who has been born into this world has already earned certain privileges on account of their faithfulness in the first estate. These privileges include an

unconditional right to receive an immortal and resurrected body one day, and, second, a *conditional* blessing, which is dependent on our faith and obedience to God, of enjoying everlasting felicity and eternal life in the presence of the Father and the Son.

Now I should like to turn for a few minutes to the third member of the Godhead, the Holy Ghost.

The Holy Ghost has many vital roles. However, I would like to refer to one that was so well expressed, many years ago, by Elder Orson Pratt of the Twelve:

*Water Baptism is only a preparatory cleansing of the believing penitent . . . ; whereas, the Baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost cleanses more thoroughly, by renewing the inner man, and by purifying the affections, desires, and thoughts which have long been habituated in the impure ways of sin. Without the aid of the Holy Ghost, a person . . . would have but very little power to change his mind . . . and to walk in newness of life. Though his sins may have been cleansed away, yet so great is the force of habit, that he would, without being renewed by the Holy Ghost, be easily overcome, and contaminated again by sin. Hence, it is infinitely important that the affections and desires should be, in a measure, changed and renewed, so as to cause him to hate that which he before loved, and to love that which he before hated: to thus renew the mind of man is the work of the Holy Ghost.*¹⁸

It is not surprising that the Prophet Joseph Smith counseled:

*Tell the people to be humble and faithful and sure to keep the Spirit of the Lord and it will lead them right. Be careful and not turn away the small still voice; it will teach [you what] to do and where to go.*¹⁹

Now, as we have gathered here this day, it is my feeling that on many of you, if not all, the Spirit and the power of the Lord has rested in some way. All of us are sometimes unaware of

the goodness of the Lord and His remarkable influence in our lives. Far too often, too many worthy and humble Saints have wondered about their personal condition or worthiness before the Lord. The Book of Mormon records that the Lamanites who had been converted by Ammon had offered a sacrifice of a broken heart and contrite spirit and, because of their faith, had been “baptized with fire and with the Holy Ghost, and they knew it not.”²⁰

I believe this to be applicable to many of the Saints in our day. I also believe it to be true of many in this gathering here today.

On the eve of the Savior’s Atonement and Great Sacrifice, He promised His Apostles that He would send them “the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.”²¹

Christ, we are told, will fight our battles,²² and the Holy Ghost, “which whispereth through and pierceth all things,”²³ will guide us.

In conclusion, I turn to this sweetest of our Lord’s invitations:

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

*For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*²⁴

Now, my beloved brothers and sisters, I cannot forego the sacred responsibility and privilege of declaring my testimony of the reality of our glorious Heavenly Father. Jesus Christ, as the resurrected and glorified Son of our Heavenly Father, is our Savior and Redeemer. He is our Advocate. He is not an absentee Master.

Ours is the privilege not to wonder at these things.

I leave you with my assurance and testimony of this divine work and my earnest prayer that

our Heavenly Father will pour out upon you His richest blessings, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Ephesians 4:14.
2. John 17:3.
3. Aristides, *The Apology of Aristides*; quoted in David W. Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs: A Reference Guide to More Than 700 Topics Discussed by the Early Church Fathers* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 309, s.v. "God."
4. See Richard D. Draper, "The Earliest 'New Testament,'" in *How the New Testament Came to Be: The 35th Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, BYU; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 260–91.
5. See Joseph Smith—History 1:18.
6. See *Church History in the Fulness of Times: Student Manual: The History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed., prepared by the Church Educational System (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003), 31.
7. Joseph Smith, *Teachings*, 345.
8. See Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 109; and Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Volume I: To A.D. 1500*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 178–79.
9. See Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1989), 125.
10. Oberman, *Luther*, 315.
11. See Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Volume II: A.D. 1500–A.D. 1975*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 703.
12. *Teachings*, 343.
13. See D&C 93:21–23.
14. Matthew 6:9.
15. Matthew 5:48.
16. John 20:17.
17. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign*, November 1995, 102.
18. Orson Pratt, "The Holy Spirit," in *A Series of Pamphlets* (1852), *Orson Pratt: Writings of an Apostle* (Salt Lake City: Mormon Heritage Publishers, 1976), 57.
19. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 98; quoted by Brigham Young, in Brigham Young, Office Files; Brigham Young, Vision; 17 February 1847; LDS Church Archives.
20. 3 Nephi 9:20.
21. John 14:26.
22. See D&C 105:14.
23. D&C 85:6.
24. Matthew 11:28–30.