

# What We Believe

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I am honored to be asked to speak at the devotional assembly this morning. Because the weekly devotionals at Brigham Young University have been such a significant part of my life, I have taken this invitation very seriously. My topic is “What We Believe.”

Sooner or later you and I will be approached by men and women not of our faith—persons either sincerely interested in what we believe or else opposed to much of what we stand for. This is particularly true as the Church grows and as our influence spreads throughout the world. Perhaps it would be worthwhile for us to entertain a few questions about what we believe, questions frequently asked of the Latter-day Saints concerning scripture, God, Christ, and salvation. For example:

## **1. How can the Latter-day Saints justify having additional books of scripture and adding to the Christian canon?**

I remember very well sitting in a seminar on biblical studies at an eastern university many years ago. One of the things that stands out in my mind is our discussion of the canon of scripture. For at least two hours the instructor had emphasized that the word *canon*—referring, of course, to the biblical books that are generally included in the Judeo-Christian

collection—was the “rule of faith,” the standard against which we measure what is acceptable in belief and practice. He also stated that the canon, if the word meant anything at all, was *closed, fixed, set, and established*. He must have stressed those words at least 10 times as he wrote them on the blackboard over and over.

I noticed in the second session on this topic that the instructor seemed a bit uneasy. I remember thinking that something must be wrong. Without warning, he stopped what he was doing, banged his fist on the table, turned to me, and said: “Mr. Millet, will you please explain to this group the Latter-day Saint concept of canon, given your people’s acceptance of the Book of Mormon and other books of scripture beyond the Bible?”

I was startled. Stunned. Certainly surprised. I paused for several seconds, looked up at the blackboard, saw the now very familiar words under the word *canon*, and said, somewhat shyly, “Well, I suppose you could say that the Latter-day Saints believe the canon of scripture is *open, flexible, and expanding*.” We then had a *really* fascinating discussion!

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Joseph Smith loved the Bible. It was through pondering upon certain verses in the Epistle of James that he felt directed to call upon God in prayer. Most of his sermons, writings, and letters are laced with quotations or paraphrased summaries of biblical passages and precepts from both the Old and New Testaments. The Prophet once remarked that one can “see God’s own handwriting in the sacred volume: and he who reads it oftenest will like it best” (*Teachings*, p. 56). From his earliest days, however, he did not believe the Bible was complete or that religious difficulties could necessarily be handled by turning to the Old or New Testaments for help (see JS—H 1:12). Nor did he believe in either the inerrancy or the infallibility of the Bible. The Prophet stated:

*From what we can draw from the Scriptures relative to the teaching of heaven, we are induced to think that much instruction has been given to man since the beginning which we do not possess now. . . . We have what we have, and the Bible contains what it does contain: but to say that God never said anything more to man than is there recorded, would be saying at once that we have at last received a revelation: for it must require one to advance thus far. [Teachings, p. 61; see also The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1984), pp. 297–301]*

Occasionally we hear certain Latter-day Saint teachings described as *unbiblical* or of a particular doctrine being *contradictory* to the Bible. Let us be clear on this matter. The Bible is one of the books within our standard works, and thus our doctrines and practices are in harmony with the Bible. There are times, of course, when latter-day revelation provides clarification or enhancement of the intended meaning in the Bible. But addition to the canon is not the same as rejection of the canon. Supplementation is not the same as contradiction. All of the prophets, including the Savior

himself, were sent to bring new light and knowledge to the world; in many cases, new scripture came as a result of their ministries. That new scripture did not invalidate what went before, nor did it close the door to subsequent revelation. We feel deep gratitude for the holy scriptures, but we do not worship scripture. Nor do we feel it appropriate to “set up stakes and set bounds to the works and ways of the Almighty,” to tell God, essentially, “Thus far and no more” (*Teachings*, p. 320; see also p. 321). As the Lord declared through Nephi, “Wherefore, because that ye have a Bible ye need not suppose that it contains all my words; neither need ye suppose that I have not caused more to be written” (2 Nephi 29:10).

In short, we believe God has spoken through modern prophets, restored his everlasting gospel, delivered new truths, and commissioned us to make them known to the world. We feel it would be unchristian *not* to share what has been communicated to us.

## **2. What do the Latter-day Saints really believe about God? Is it true that they believe man can become as God?**

Joseph Smith’s First Vision represents the beginning of the revelation of God to man in this dispensation. We will no doubt spend a lifetime seeking to understand the doctrinal profundity of that theophany. This appearance of the Father and Son in upstate New York had the effect of challenging those creeds of Christendom out of which the doctrine of the Trinity came—a doctrine that evolved from efforts to reconcile Christian theology with Greek philosophy. (See Adolph von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* [New York: Harper, 1957]; Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity* [Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1970]; Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, rev. ed. [New York: Penguin Books, 1993], pp. 77, 89–90; Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993], pp. 28–29, 74,

84–85, 231–47; Dallin H. Oaks, *CR*, April 1995, pp. 112–13.) President Gordon B. Hinckley has observed:

*To me it is a significant and marvelous thing that in establishing and opening this dispensation our Father did so with a revelation of himself and of his Son Jesus Christ, as if to say to all the world that he was weary of the attempts of men, earnest though these attempts might have been, to define and describe him. . . . The experience of Joseph Smith in a few moments in the grove on a spring day in 1820, brought more light and knowledge and understanding of the personality and reality and substance of God and his Beloved Son than men had arrived at during centuries of speculation. [TGBH, p. 236]*

By revelation Joseph Smith came to know that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost constitute the Godhead. From the beginning the Prophet Joseph taught that the members of the Godhead are one in purpose, one in mind, one in glory, one in attributes and powers, but separate persons (see *Teachings*, p. 370).

God is the Father of the spirits of all men and women (see Numbers 16:22, 27:16), the source of light and truth, the embodiment of all godly attributes and gifts, and the supreme power and intelligence over all things. From the book of Moses we learn that among the ancients God the Father was called “Man of Holiness,” and thus his Only Begotten Son is the Son of Man of Holiness, or the Son of Man (Moses 6:57). The title Man of Holiness opens us to a deeper understanding of deity. We believe that God the Father is an exalted man, a corporeal being, a personage of flesh and bones.<sup>1</sup>

That God has a physical body is one of the most important of all truths restored in this dispensation; it is inextricably tied to such doctrines as the immortality of the soul, the literal resurrection, eternal marriage, and the continuation of the family unit into eternity. In his corporeal or physical nature, God can be in only

one place at a time. His divine nature is such, however, that his glory, his power, and his influence, meaning his Holy Spirit, fill the immensity of space and are the means by which he is omnipresent and through which law and light and life are extended to us (see D&C 88:6–13). The Father’s physical body does not limit his capacity or detract one wit from his infinite holiness, any more than Christ’s resurrected body did so (see Luke 24, John 20–21).

Interestingly enough, research by Professor David Paulsen of our Philosophy Department indicates that the idea of God’s corporeality was taught in the early Christian church into the fourth and fifth centuries before being lost to the knowledge of the people. (See David L. Paulsen, “Early Christian Belief in a Corporeal Deity: Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses,” *Harvard Theological Review* 83, no. 2 [April 1990]: 105–16; “The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment: Restoration, Judeo-Christian, and Philosophical Perspectives,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 35, no. 4 [1996]: 7–94.)

On the one hand, we worship a divine Being with whom we can identify. That is to say, his infinity does not preclude either his immediacy or his intimacy. “In the day that God created man,” the scriptures attest, “in the likeness of God made he him; in the image of his own body, male and female, created he them” (Moses 6:8–9). God is not simply a spirit influence, a force in the universe, or the First Great Cause. When we pray, “Our Father which art in heaven” (Matthew 6:9), we mean what we say. We believe God is comprehensible, knowable, approachable, and, like his Beloved Son, touched with the feeling of our infirmities (Hebrews 4:15).

On the other hand, our God is God. There is no knowledge of which the Father is ignorant and no power he does not possess (see 1 Nephi 7:12, 2 Nephi 9:20, Mosiah 4:9, Alma 26:35, Helaman 9:41, Ether 3:4). Scriptural passages that speak of him being the same yesterday, today, and forever (e.g., Psalms 102:27;

Hebrews 1:12, 13:8; 1 Nephi 10:18–19; 2 Nephi 27:23; Alma 7:20; Mormon 9:8–11, 19; Moroni 8:18, 10:7; D&C 3:2, 20:12, 17, 35:1) clearly have reference to his divine attributes—his love, justice, constancy, and willingness to bless his children. In addition, President Joseph Fielding Smith explained:

From eternity to eternity means from the spirit existence through the probation which we are in, and then back again to the eternal existence which will follow. *Surely this is everlasting, for when we receive the resurrection, we will never die. We all existed in the first eternity. I think I can say of myself and others, we are from eternity; and we will be to eternity everlasting, if we receive the exaltation.* [*Doctrines of Salvation*, 3 vols., comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 1:12; emphasis in original. See also Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1978), p. 166.]

We come to the earth to take a physical body, to be schooled and gain experiences in this second estate that we could not have in the first estate, the premortal life. We then strive to keep the commandments and grow in faith and spiritual graces until we are prepared to go where God and Christ are. Eternal life consists in being *with* God; in addition, it entails being *like* God. A study of Christian history reveals that the doctrine of the deification of man was taught at least into the fifth century by such notables as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Justin Martyr, Athanasius, and Augustine (see Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christian?* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991], pp. 60–61). Because we know that many plain and precious truths were taken from the Bible before it was compiled (see 1 Nephi 13:20–39 and preface to D&C 76), we might not agree with some of what was taught about deification by such Christian thinkers, but it is clear that the idea was not foreign to the people of the early Church.

For that matter, no less a modern Christian theologian than C. S. Lewis recognized the logical and theological extension of being transformed by Christ. “The Son of God became a man,” Lewis pointed out, “to enable men to become sons of God” (*Mere Christianity* [New York: Macmillan, 1952], p. 154; see also *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* [New York: Macmillan, 1980], p. 18). Further, Lewis has explained:

*The command Be ye perfect is not idealistic gas. Nor is it a command to do the impossible. He is going to make us into creatures that can obey that command. He said (in the Bible) that we were “gods” and He is going to make good His words. If we let Him—for we can prevent Him, if we choose—He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful; but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what He said.* [Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 174–75; emphasis in original]

All men and women, like Christ, are made in the image and likeness of God (see Genesis 1:27, Moses 2:27), and so it is neither robbery nor heresy for the children of God to aspire to be like God (see Matthew 5:48, Philippians 2:6). Like any parent, our Heavenly Father wants his children to become and be all that he is. Godhood comes through overcoming the world through the Atonement (see 1 John 5:4–5; Revelation 2:7, 11; D&C 76:51–60), becoming heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ, who is the natural Heir (see Romans 8:17, Galatians 4:7), and thus inheriting *all* things, just as Jesus inherits all things (see 1 Corinthians 3:21–23; Revelation 21:7; D&C 76:55, 95, 84:38, 88:107). The faithful are

received into the “church of the Firstborn” (Hebrews 12:23; D&C 76:54, 67, 94, 93:22), meaning they inherit as though they were the firstborn. In that glorified state we will be conformed to the image of the Lord Jesus (see Romans 8:29, 1 Corinthians 15:49, 2 Corinthians 3:18, 1 John 3:2, Alma 5:14), receive his glory, and be one with him and with the Father (see John 17:21–23, Philippians 3:21).

Although we know from modern revelation that godhood comes through the receipt of eternal life (see D&C 132:19–20), we do not believe we will ever, worlds without end, unseat or oust God the Eternal Father or his Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ; those holy beings are and forever will be the gods we worship. Even though we believe in the ultimate deification of man, I am unaware of any authoritative statement in LDS literature that suggests that we will ever worship any being other than the ones within the Godhead. We believe in “one God” in the sense that we love and serve one Godhead, one divine presidency, each of whom possesses all of the attributes of Godhood (see Alma 11:44, D&C 20:28).

In short, God is not of another species, nor is he the great unknowable one; he is indeed our Father in Heaven. He has revealed a plan whereby we might enjoy happiness in this world and dwell with him and be like him in the world to come.

### **3. Do the Latter-day Saints believe that salvation comes through their own works rather than by the grace of Christ? Are they “saved” Christians?**

The theological debate over whether we are saved by grace or by works is a fruitless argument that is much “like asking which blade in a pair of scissors is most necessary” (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 129). Latter-day Saints have often been critical of those who stress salvation by grace alone, and we have often been criticized for a type of works-righteousness. The gospel is in fact a gospel

covenant—a two-way promise. The Lord agrees to do for us what we could never do for ourselves—to forgive our sins, to lift our burdens, to renew our souls and re-create our nature, to raise us from the dead and qualify us for glory hereafter. At the same time, we promise to do what we *can* do—receive the ordinances of salvation, love and serve one another (see Mosiah 18:8–10), and do all in our power to put off the natural man and deny ourselves of ungodliness (see Mosiah 3:19, Moroni 10:32).

We believe that more is required of men and women than a verbal expression of faith in the Lord, more than a confession with the lips that we have received Christ into our hearts. The scriptures of the Restoration add perspective and balance to the majestic teachings of the apostle Paul on the matter of salvation by grace. We know, without question, that the power to save us, to change us, to renew our souls, is in Christ. True faith, however, always manifests itself in *faithfulness*. Good works evidence our faith and our desire to remain in covenant with Christ, but they are not *sufficient*. (See Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 3 vols. [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–73], 2:499–500; and Dallin H. Oaks, *CR*, October 1988, p. 78). The real question is not whether I am saved by grace or by works but rather, In whom do I trust? On whom do I rely? (See 1 Nephi 10:6; 2 Nephi 2:8, 31:19; Moroni 6:4.)

Too often we are prone to view grace as that increment of goodness, that final gift of God that will make up the difference and thereby boost us into the celestial kingdom, “after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23). To be sure, we will need a full measure of divine assistance to become celestial material. But the grace of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord, is available to us every hour of every day of our lives. “True grace,” as one non-LDS writer has suggested, “is more than just a giant freebie, opening the door to heaven in the sweet by and by, but

leaving us to wallow in sin in the bitter here and now. Grace is God presently at work in our lives” (John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* [Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993], p. 32). The grace of God is a precious gift, an enabling power to face life with quiet courage, to do things we could never do on our own. The Great Physician does more than forgive sins. He ministers relief to the disconsolate, comfort to the bereaved, confidence to those who wrestle with infirmities and feelings of inadequacy, and strength and peace to those who have been battered and scarred by the ironies of this life (see Isaiah 61:1–2, Alma 7:11–13).

Few things would be more serious than encouraging lip service to God but discouraging obedience and faithful discipleship. On the other hand, surely nothing could be more offensive to God than a smug self-assurance that comes from trusting in one’s own works or relying upon one’s own strength. Understanding this sacred principle—the relationship between the grace of an infinite Being and the works of finite man—is not easy, but it is immensely rewarding. The more we learn to trust the Lord and rely upon his merits and mercy, the less anxious we become about life here and hereafter. “Thus if you have really handed yourself over to Him,” C. S. Lewis wisely remarked, “it must follow that you are trying to obey Him. But trying in a new way, a less worried way” (Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 129).

Are we then “saved Christians”? Whereas the ultimate blessings of salvation do not come until the next life, there is a sense in which people in this life may enjoy the assurance of salvation and the peace that accompanies that knowledge (see D&C 59:23). True faith in Christ produces hope in Christ—not worldly wishing but expectation, anticipation, assurance. As the apostle Paul wrote, the Holy Spirit provides the “earnest of our inheritance,” the promise or evidence that we are on course, in covenant, and thus in line for full salvation in

the world to come (Ephesians 1:13–14; see 2 Corinthians 1:21–22, 5:5). That is, the Spirit of God operating in our lives is like the Lord’s “earnest money” on us—his sweet certification that he seriously intends to save us with an everlasting salvation. Thus, if we are striving to cultivate the gift of the Holy Ghost, we are living in what might be called a “saved” condition.

One of the most respected Evangelical theologians, John Stott, has written:

*Salvation is a big and comprehensive word. It embraces the totality of God’s saving work, from beginning to end. In fact salvation has three tenses, past, present and future. . . . “I have been saved (in the past) from the penalty of sin by a crucified Saviour. I am being saved (in the present) from the power of sin by a living Saviour. And I shall be saved (in the future) from the very presence of sin by a coming Saviour” . . .*

*If therefore you were to ask me, “Are you saved?” there is only one correct biblical answer which I could give you: “yes and no.” Yes, in the sense that by the sheer grace and mercy of God through the death of Jesus Christ my Saviour he has forgiven my sins, justified me and reconciled me to himself. But no, in the sense that I still have a fallen nature and live in a fallen world and have a corruptible body, and I am longing for my salvation to be brought to its triumphant completion. [Authentic Christianity from the Writings of John Stott, ed. Timothy Dudley-Smith (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 168]*

President David O. McKay taught that

*the gospel of Jesus Christ, as revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith, is in very deed, in every way, the power of God unto salvation. It is salvation here—here and now. It gives to every man the perfect life, here and now, as well as hereafter. [GI, p. 6; emphasis in original. See also Brigham Young, JD 6:276 and 8:124–25.]*

Too many of us wrestle with feelings of inadequacy, struggle with hopelessness, and in general are much too anxious about our standing before God. It is important to keep the ultimate goal of exaltation ever before us, but it seems so much more profitable to focus on fundamentals and on the here and now—staying in covenant, being dependable and true to our promises, cultivating the gift of the Holy Ghost. President Brigham Young taught:

*Our work is a work of the present. The salvation we are seeking is for the present, and, sought correctly, it can be obtained, and be continually enjoyed. If it continues to-day, it is upon the same principle that it will continue to-morrow, the next day, the next week, or the next year, and, we might say, the next eternity. [JD 1:131]*

In short, salvation is in Christ, and our covenant with Christ, our trust in his power to redeem us, should be demonstrated in how we live. The influence of the Holy Ghost in our lives is a sign to us that we are on course, “in Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:17), and thus in line for salvation.

#### **4. Are the Latter-day Saints Christian? Or do they, as some have suggested, worship a different Jesus?**

We believe in Jesus of Nazareth, in the One sent of the Father to “bind up the broken-hearted” and “proclaim liberty to the captives” (see Isaiah 61:1, D&C 138:11–18). For us, the Jesus of history is indeed the Christ of faith. He was and is the Only Begotten Son of God in the flesh (see John 3:16, 2 Nephi 25:12, D&C 20:21). Although some may exclude us from the category of Christian for this or that doctrinal matter, our behavior must be consistent with our profession; those who claim new life in the Spirit are expected to walk in the Spirit (see Galatians 5:25).

“Are we Christians?” President Gordon B. Hinckley asked.

*Of course we are! No one can honestly deny that. We may be somewhat different from the traditional pattern of Christianity. But no one believes more literally in the redemption wrought by the Lord Jesus Christ. No one believes more fundamentally that He was the Son of God, that He died for the sins of mankind, that He rose from the grave, and that He is the living resurrected Son of the living Father.*

*All of our doctrine, all of our religious practice stems from that one basic doctrinal position: “We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.” This is the first article of our faith, and all else flows therefrom. [Meeting with Religion Newswriters Association, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 14 September 1997; excerpted in Speaking Today, Ensign, February 1998, p. 73]*

In the long run, all we can do is live what we preach and bear testimony of what we feel in our hearts and know in our minds. Although we do not want to be misunderstood and we certainly would like for others to recognize the centrality of Christ in our lives, we do not require the imprimatur of the religious world to substantiate our claim. We are who we are and we know who we are, and if all the world should think otherwise, so be it. Our primary thrust in the religious world is not to court favor. Our desire to build bridges of understanding does not excuse us from the obligation to maintain our distinctive position in the religious world. Our strength lies in our distinctiveness, for we have something to offer the world, something of great worth. No one wants to be spurned, misunderstood, or misrepresented. But sometimes such is the cost of discipleship (see Matthew 5:10–12).

As to whether we worship a different Jesus, we say again: We accept and endorse the testimony of the New Testament writers: Jesus is the Promised Messiah, the resurrection and the life (see John 11:25), literally the light of the world (see John 8:12). Everything that testifies

of his divine birth, his goodness, his transforming power, and his godhood, we embrace enthusiastically. He has broken the bands of death and lives today. All this we know. But we know much more about the Christ because of what has been made known through latter-day prophets. President Brigham Young thus declared:

*We, the Latter-day Saints, take the liberty of believing more than our Christian brethren: we not only believe . . . the Bible, but . . . the whole of the plan of salvation that Jesus has given to us. Do we differ from others who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? No, only in believing more. [JD 13:56]*

Our conduct and our way of life cannot be separated from our doctrine, for what we believe empowers and directs what we do. A number of years ago an article appeared in *Christianity Today* entitled “Why Your Neighbor Joined the Mormon Church.” Five reasons were given:

1. The Latter-day Saints show genuine love and concern by taking care of their people.
2. They strive to build the family unit.
3. They provide for their young people.
4. There is a layman’s church.
5. They believe that divine revelation is the basis for their practices.

After a brief discussion of each of the above, the author of the article concluded:

*In a day when many are hesitant to claim that God has said anything definitive, the Mormons stand out in contrast, and many people are ready to listen to what the Mormons think the voice of God says. It is tragic that their message is false, but it is nonetheless a lesson to us that people are many times ready to hear a voice of authority. [Donald P. Shoemaker, “Why Your Neighbor Joined the Mormon Church,” *Christianity Today* 19, no. 1 (11 October 1974): 11–13]*

The Savior taught of the importance of judging things—prophets, for example—by their fruits, by the product of their ministry and teachings (see Matthew 7:15–20, 1 John 3:7). He also explained that “every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up” (Matthew 15:13). Evil trees cannot bring forth good fruit. Works of men eventually come to naught, but that which is of God cannot be overthrown (see Acts 5:38–39).

In short, we proclaim that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ. We have taken his name upon us, eagerly acknowledge the redeeming power of his blood, and seek to emulate his perfect life.

Let me close by sharing with you three simple suggestions—learned through both sad and sweet experience—on how we might effectively deal with difficult questions posed by those not of our faith. First, *stay in control*. There is nothing more frustrating than knowing the truth, loving the truth, sincerely desiring to share the truth, and yet being unable to communicate our deepest feelings to another who sees things differently. Argument or disputation over sacred things cause us to forfeit the Spirit of God and thus the confirming power of our message (see 3 Nephi 11:28–30). We teach and we testify. Contention is unbecoming of one called to publish peace and thus bless our brothers and sisters. In the words of Elder Marvin J. Ashton, “We have no time for contention. We only have time to be about our Father’s business” (*CR*, April 1978, p. 9).

Second, *stay in order*. The Savior taught that gospel prerequisites should be observed when teaching sacred things (see Matthew 7:6–7; see also Boyd K. Packer, *Teach Ye Diligently* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1975], chapter 11; *The Holy Temple* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980], chapter 2). A person, for example, who knows very little about our doctrine will probably not understand or appreciate our teachings concerning temples, sealing powers, eternal life, or the deification of man. Joseph Smith the Prophet explained, “If



we start right, it is easy to go right all the time; but if we start wrong, we may go wrong, and it [will] be a hard matter to get right" (*Teachings*, p. 343). It is always wise to lay a proper foundation for what is to be said; the truth can then flow more freely. The apostle Peter is said to have explained to Clement:

*The teaching of all doctrine has a certain order, and there are some things which must be delivered first, others in the second place, and others in the third, and so all in their order; and if these things be delivered in their order, they become plain; but if they be brought forward out of order, they will seem to be spoken against reason. [Clementine Recognitions III, p. 34; cited in Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company and FARMS, 1988), p. 97]*

Third, *stay in context*. As we have already noted, we love the Bible and cherish its messages. But the Bible is not the source of our doctrine or authority, nor is much to be gained through efforts to "prove" the truthfulness of the restored gospel from the Bible. Ours is an independent revelation. We know what we know about the premortal existence, priesthood, celestial marriage, baptism for the dead, the postmortal spirit world, degrees of glory, etc., because of what God has made known through latter-day prophets, not because we are able to identify a few biblical allusions to these matters. Some of our greatest difficulties in handling questions about our faith come when we try to establish specific doctrines of the Restoration from the Bible alone. There is consummate peace and spiritual power to be derived from being loyal to those things the Almighty has communicated to us in our dispensation (see D&C 5:10, 31:3–4, 43:15–16, 49:1–4, 84:54–61). President Ezra Taft Benson stated:

*Our main task is to declare the gospel and do it effectively. We are not obligated to answer every*

*objection. Every man eventually is backed up to the wall of faith, and there he must make his stand. [Ezra Taft Benson, *A Witness and a Warning* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1988), p. 5]*

I testify to the truthfulness of these remarkable doctrines about which I have been speaking. I know, by the witness of the Holy Ghost to my soul, that God is our Father, Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior, Joseph Smith was and is a prophet of the living God, and that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is indeed the kingdom of God on earth. These things I know, because I have studied and searched and sought to understand. These things I know, because I have read and pondered and prayed and pleaded for light and knowledge. What has come to me is as settling and soothing to my heart as it is stimulating and enlarging to my mind. This work is true, and because it is true it will triumph. The First Presidency of the Church in 1907 declared:

*Our motives are not selfish; our purposes not petty and earth-bound; we contemplate the human race, past, present and yet to come, as immortal beings, for whose salvation it is our mission to labor; and to this work, broad as eternity and deep as the love of God, we devote ourselves, now, and forever. [CR, April 1907, appendix, p. 16; cited in Howard W. Hunter, *That We Might Have Joy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1994), p. 59]*

I pray that we will come to know what we believe, by study and by faith, and then with boldness but quiet dignity share those saving truths with others, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

#### Note

1. If the 14-year-old Joseph Smith did indeed learn of the Father's corporeality in the First Vision, he did not state it specifically in his various accounts of that vision. The Prophet

explained in Ramus, Illinois, that “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s” (D&C 130:22). That statement was recorded in April of 1843. However, the Saints were teaching of God’s corporeal nature at least as early as 1836. (See Milton V. Backman, Jr.,

“Truman Coe’s 1836 Description of Mormonism,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 17, no. 3 [spring 1977]: 347–55; see also *The Words of Joseph Smith*, eds. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook [Provo: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1980], pp. 60, 63–64.)