

The Doctrine and Covenants— The Capstone of Our Religion

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Charles Dickens began his famous story of *A Tale of Two Cities* with these words:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, . . . it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.

I would imagine that could be said of all periods of time. This is a wonderful time to be alive! As I witness the marvelous strides mankind is making today, I sometimes wish that I was your age. With the pace at which man is progressing, the Lord seems to be preparing us to accomplish much more as we wind up this final period of man's mortal experience. Of course, it could be said it is the worst of times because most of mankind has not embraced the gospel of our Lord and Savior.

It is evident from the signs of the times that the Lord is directing the destiny of His children here on earth. For example, there has been a significant change in the growth of the world's population. At the end of the first millennium following our Savior's birth, the world's population was only 300 million. During the next

800 years to the time of the birth of the Prophet Joseph Smith, the population had grown to one billion—or 700,000,000 more during those 800 years. Today the world's population is over 6.2 billion—5.2 billion added in the last 200 years.

In the post-Restoration period, the Lord has sent billions more of His children to the earth to hear His gospel. To facilitate this teaching, He has opened the minds of His children that they might bring forth an abundance of technologies to improve our ability to travel, communicate, and carry the gospel to the world.

Prior to the beginning of the 19th century, travel was much as it had been anciently—by foot, by domestic animal, and by ship on waterways. Communication was by word of mouth and very little written. After 1,800 years of sluggish development, it was as if a bright light was turned on to illuminate the minds of mankind, and suddenly the fields of transportation and communication moved forward with a new and exciting pace.

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For example, in 1803 Fulton invented the steamboat. In 1814 Stevenson developed the steam locomotive. In 1819 Napier, the flatbed cylinder press. In 1837 Morse, the telegraph. In 1845 the oceanic cable was laid. In 1876 Bell, the telephone. In 1880 Edison, the electric light. In 1893 Ford, the automobile. And in 1903 the Wright brothers flew their first airplane. Since that time there has been an explosion of developments that have improved our abilities to travel and communicate, making most parts of the world accessible via travel or by electronic means.

The Value of Scripture

To me, the most significant evidence of the Lord's concern for His children is the way He has provided communication channels to direct us in the path He would like us to follow. We have the scriptures.

I marvel at how these wondrous stories of God's dealings with His children here on earth were preserved through the ages. The records were kept on tablets of clay or stone; they were written on metal plates, on leather scrolls, and, of course, papyrus discovered by the Egyptians about the time Abraham was on the earth. I marvel that great and stalwart leaders like Jerome, Wycliffe, and Tyndale accumulated the writings of the ancient prophets and were able to put them in an accessible form even though the ability to make records was so crude in that time. Sometimes they even gave up their lives to preserve what we have today.

We find the Lord communicating with His children from the very beginning. After Adam and Eve had been driven out of the Garden of Eden, we find this great account of the Lord instructing them:

And Adam and Eve, his wife, called upon the name of the Lord, and they heard the voice of the Lord from the way toward the Garden of Eden, speaking unto them, and they saw him not; for they were shut out from his presence.

And he gave unto them commandments, that they should worship the Lord their God, and should offer the firstlings of their flocks, for an offering unto the Lord. And Adam was obedient unto the commandments of the Lord.

And after many days an angel of the Lord appeared unto Adam, saying: Why dost thou offer sacrifices unto the Lord? And Adam said unto him: I know not, save the Lord commanded me.

And then the angel spake, saying: This thing is a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father, which is full of grace and truth.

Wherefore, thou shalt do all that thou doest in the name of the Son, and thou shalt repent and call upon God in the name of the Son forevermore.

And in that day the Holy Ghost fell upon Adam, which beareth record of the Father and the Son, saying: I am the Only Begotten of the Father from the beginning, henceforth and forever, that as thou hast fallen thou mayest be redeemed, and all mankind, even as many as will.

And in that day Adam blessed God and was filled, and began to prophesy concerning all the families of the earth, saying: Blessed be the name of God, for because of my transgression my eyes are opened, and in this life I shall have joy, and again in the flesh I shall see God.

And Eve, his wife, heard all these things and was glad, saying: Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient.

And Adam and Eve blessed the name of God, and they made all things known unto their sons and their daughters. [Moses 5:4–12]

Thus from the time of the Creation we have the beautiful scriptures that lay a pattern to guide us through mortality. We learn our beginnings through the story of Adam and Eve. An article in the *Ensign* some years ago enlarged my understanding of the very important role Adam played in the creation of the earth. Actually Adam's role in the eternal plan

of God began in our premortal first estate, and the fact that he became the first inhabitant tells us of the eminence of his premortal status. It was part of the plan that he and Eve partake of the forbidden fruit. President Joseph Fielding Smith said: “He partook of that fruit for one good reason, and that was to open the door to bring you and me and everyone else into this world” (in Conference Report, October 1967, 121).

Adam continues to play an important role in the postmortal spirit world and will until the time of the Resurrection.

It is in the Old Testament that we learn of Father Abraham and his willingness to sacrifice his son if the Lord required him to do so. In all things he set the example of faithfulness to the Lord. Through Abraham’s “seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice” (Genesis 22:18).

And don’t you love the story of Joseph with his marvelous lesson! He had quite a life—being a favored son, a slave, a prisoner, and ultimately ruler over the land of Egypt. Pharaoh said, “Only in the throne will I be greater than thou” (Genesis 41:40). This because he was “a man in whom the Spirit of God is” (Genesis 41:38).

Then there was Moses. He was given an impossible assignment to lead the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt, where they had been in bondage for over 400 years. Elder Mark E. Petersen said:

The true Moses was one of the mightiest men of God in all time. . . .

He walked and talked with God. . . .

He saw the mysteries of the heavens and much of creation, and received laws from God beyond any other ancient man of whom we have record. [Moses: Man of Miracles (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 49]

In the Old Testament we learn of great and noble women, such as Eve, Sarah, Rebekah,

Leah, Rachel, Hannah, and many others. The book of Ruth tells us of Ruth’s life and of her devotion to righteous principles. She was a true convert to Jehovah and, after losing her husband, chose to remain with her mother-in-law, Naomi, that “thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God” (Ruth 1:16). Ruth later married Boaz, and they became the parents of a noble posterity including King David, Mary, and the Messiah.

Esther is also from a book of the Old Testament. She was of Jewish descent and found favor with the king and became his queen without revealing her kindred. Later, when the lives of her people were threatened, she risked her own life to save them. They were saved because of her faith and that of her people.

The New Testament is just what the title page tells us. It is the New Testament of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Here we may come to know of the events of His life, His lineage, and His miraculous though humble birth. The New Testament does not reveal a great deal about the early years of preparation of His ministry, but in Luke we read: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man” (Luke 2:52).

We learn of His teachings—His example, His love, His knowledge, His power, His judgment, His kindness, His mercy, His patience. Moreover, we learn of His suffering at Gethsemane, His agony on the cross, His death, then His Resurrection. He made the ultimate sacrifice for us, not only losing His life but, in doing so, atoning for our sins. Most of all He has shown us the way, and we need to learn of Him that we may become “perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

I marvel that the Lord’s dealings with His prophets have been preserved through all ages of time in these great scriptures. The materials on which the words were written were not of permanent quality. To preserve them from

generation to generation, they had to be copied over and over to keep them from the destructive forces of nature. The repeated copying by the scribes led to mistranslations and omissions. Nephi warned us, “For behold, they have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious; and also many covenants of the Lord have they taken away” (1 Nephi 13:26).

A New Witness: The Book of Mormon

However, because of the various translations and the difficulty in producing the translations, the Lord saw fit at the time of the Restoration to bring forth a new witness of His mission. We have the great blessing of the Book of Mormon that is another testament of Jesus Christ. It is a record of God’s dealings with the ancient inhabitants of the Americas and contains the fulness of the everlasting gospel.

The Prophet Joseph Smith told us, “The Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book” (Book of Mormon introduction; also *HC* 4:461).

There were prophets who summarized on the pages the things that men must do in order to gain the fulness of salvation. Those who believe the witness it bears and obey the doctrines it teaches will be led to further light and knowledge revealed in our day and to the mysteries that the believing Saints alone can receive.

I marvel at the account of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Joseph Smith’s prophetic call was to bring forth this great publication. It was in the year of 1823, at the age of 17, that he was shown the hidden records by the angel Moroni. After several visitations over the next four years, Joseph Smith was allowed to remove the sacred record that had rested at the Hill Cumorah near Palmyra, New York.

When Joseph went to the hill on the 22nd day of September 1827, the angel instructed him in matters pertaining to his sacred duty.

At last the time arrived for the delivery of the plates and the Urim and Thummim and the breastplate to the Prophet Joseph Smith. He finally had them in his possession. The Prophet commenced the translation very slowly and methodically. He needed a scribe. In February of 1828 Martin Harris went to his home. Martin had been impressed with the stories he had heard about the Prophet having the gold plates. He acted as scribe from the 12th of April 1828 until he finally convinced the Prophet that he be allowed to take the record and show it to a few people to convince them that the work he was doing was important.

Permission was finally granted to him on the 14th day of June. Of course we know that that part of the record was lost. Joseph was soundly rebuked and warned against yielding to temptation. The records were taken from him for a season to give him time to repent. It was a bitter lesson for the young prophet, but it was necessary to prepare him for the great responsibility that was ahead of him. Sometime during the fall of the year 1828, the record was back in his hands, but once again he needed a scribe. It was on the 5th day of April 1829 that a young schoolteacher named Oliver Cowdery went to the home of the Prophet and inquired about his work. On the 7th day of April, Oliver Cowdery started acting as scribe to the Prophet. As the history records, the Prophet and Oliver Cowdery spent long hours together dictating the translation without reference to any books, papers, or manuscripts. After they would take a break, the Prophet would return and resume the dictation where the previous segment had ended.

As we examine the record, it is clear that Joseph Smith could not be the author of the Book of Mormon. The marvel of the whole translation was the rapidity with which the Book of Mormon was translated. It required only 85 days from the seventh day of April—the date Oliver Cowdery commenced acting as scribe—until the end of June, when the

complete text was finished and ready to turn over to the printer.

The Doctrine and Covenants gives us evidence of the power of translation of the Prophet Joseph Smith as contained in section 20, verses 8–12:

And gave him power from on high, by the means which were before prepared, to translate the Book of Mormon;

Which contains a record of a fallen people, and the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles and to the Jews also;

Which was given by inspiration, and is confirmed to others by the ministering of angels, and is declared unto the world by them—

Proving to the world that the holy scriptures are true, and that God does inspire men and call them to his holy work in this age and generation, as well as in generations of old;

Thereby showing that he is the same God yesterday, today, and forever.

The Capstone: The Doctrine and Covenants

This was not the end, for in the ninth article of faith we read: “We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.”

The Lord continues to inspire His holy prophets to make a record of His dealings with them. In our time we have another scripture—not one of ancient origin, as are the Bible and the Book of Mormon, but one that has come forth in our time, one contained in the book of the Doctrine and Covenants.

President Ezra Taft Benson, in explaining the Doctrine and Covenants, put it this way:

The Doctrine and Covenants brings men to Christ’s kingdom, even The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth” [D&C 1:30]. I know that.

The Book of Mormon is the “keystone” of our religion, and the Doctrine and Covenants is the capstone, with continuing latter-day revelation. The Lord has placed His stamp of approval on both the keystone and the capstone. [In Conference Report, April 1987, 105; or “The Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants,” Ensign, May 1987, 83]

The keystone and the capstone teach us about the cornerstone of our religion, which is the Savior.

Shortly after the organization of the Church, the members were desirous of obtaining copies of the revelations given to the Prophet Joseph Smith up to that time. In the summer of 1830, the Prophet by divine command commenced to copy and prepare the revelations, no doubt with the thought in mind of having them published. Some of the elders were carrying copies in their pockets, so far as the Lord would permit them, for there were some of the revelations that were forbidden to be published to the world.

On the first and second of November 1831, a conference was held at Hiram, Ohio, when it was decided that the revelations should be compiled and published. On the first day of the conference the Lord gave approval to the plan by giving a revelation He called His “preface unto the book of my commandments, which I have given them to publish unto you, O inhabitants of the earth” (D&C 1:6).

During the course of the conference there was not perfect harmony among the brethren. A few criticized the language found in the revelations. They forgot that the Lord uses men as instruments as they are available, through whom He communicates, just as an author when writing makes use of whatever pen, paper, or ink he may be able to obtain to produce his work. Some of the brethren did not fully realize that divine revelation is independent from university study, and

they were wavering in their faith. In answer to this inquiry, the Lord issued a challenge:

Now, seek ye out of the Book of Commandments, even the least that is among them, and appoint him that is the most wise among you;

Or, if there be any among you that shall make one like unto it, then ye are justified in saying that ye do not know that they are true;

But if ye cannot make one like unto it, ye are under condemnation if ye do not bear record that they are true. [D&C 67:6–8]

William E. McLellin accepted the offer and undertook to initiate the revelations of the Lord. His efforts to produce a revelation were witnessed with great interest by the elders assembled, and when they were aware of his complete failure, all doubts concerning the revelations of God vanished. They were then willing to testify to the truth and signed a document containing their testimonies and witnesses to the truthfulness of the book.

Following the testimonies of the brethren, the conference authorized the publication of the revelations as the Book of Commandments. On the 12th day of November 1831, the Lord called John Whitmer, the Church historian and recorder, to accompany Oliver Cowdery, who had been commanded to carry the manuscripts to Missouri for printing.

On the 20th of November 1831, Oliver and John started for Missouri, arriving in Independence on the 5th of January 1832 after a long, cold journey. In June, Elder W. W. Phelps, who had the printing press of the Church in Independence, Missouri, began publishing extracts from the revelations in the *Evening and Morning Star* and setting the type for the Book of Commandments. The work on the press was slow and tedious.

Material for covers for the book was lacking but proved to be unnecessary. On the night of July 23, 1833, a mob broke into the establishment, carrying away the press

and destroying the type and burning most of the papers and printed matter. One of the elders working on the publication, seeing the mob at the front door, hastily snatched an armload of assembled sheets of the Book of Commandments, found his way out the rear door, and buried them beneath the hay in an old barn. Then, fearing that he had been seen with his burden and that the copies might be found and destroyed, he loaded his arms with some bricks he found in the barn and in broad view started off in another direction. The ploy apparently worked, for as night came upon the city, at least 20 copies of the Book of Commandments had been preserved, but the publication of the Book of Commandments was effectively stopped.

In September of 1834, the First Presidency was appointed to select the revelations to be published, and the Prophet revised some of them from the original Book of Commandments to correct some of the printing errors and add additional information and some revelations received since 1833. The committee's work was completed the following summer, and a solemn assembly was convened on the 17th day of August 1835 to vote on the new book of scriptures to be called the Doctrine and Covenants.

The preface of the Doctrine and Covenants introduces the message of the book:

Hearken, O ye people of my church, saith the voice of him who dwells on high, and whose eyes are upon all men; yea, verily I say: Hearken ye people from afar; and ye that are upon the islands of the sea, listen together.

For verily the voice of the Lord is unto all men, and there is none to escape; and there is no eye that shall not see, neither ear that shall not hear, neither heart that shall not be penetrated.

And the rebellious shall be pierced with much sorrow; for their iniquities shall be spoken upon the housetops, and their secret acts shall be revealed.

And the voice of warning shall be unto all people, by the mouths of my disciples, whom I have chosen in these last days.

And they shall go forth and none shall stay them, for I the Lord have commanded them.

Behold, this is mine authority, and the authority of my servants, and my preface unto the book of my commandments, which I have given them to publish unto you, O inhabitants of the earth.

Wherefore, fear and tremble, O ye people, for what I the Lord have decreed in them shall be fulfilled. [D&C 1:1–7]

Then verses 37–39:

Search these commandments, for they are true and faithful, and the prophecies and promises which are in them shall all be fulfilled.

What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself; and though the heavens and the earth pass away, my word shall not pass away, but shall all be fulfilled, whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same.

For behold, and lo, the Lord is God, and the Spirit beareth record, and the record is true, and the truth abideth forever and ever.

The entire book of scripture stands as a warning to the nations that God will not be mocked. Those who heed the voice of warning will find protection and peace, but those who refuse it will reap bitter fruit. President Joseph Fielding Smith said:

This Doctrine and Covenants [is not a book just for the Latter-day Saints. It is more than that. It] belongs to all the world, to the Catholics, to the Presbyterians, to the Methodists, to the infidel, to the non-believer. It is his book if he will accept it. . . . The Lord has given it unto the world for their salvation. If you do not believe it, you read the first section in this book, the preface, and you will find that the Lord has sent this book and the things which it contains unto the people afar off, on the islands of the sea, in foreign lands, and his voice

is unto all people, that all may hear. And so I say it belongs to all the world, not only to the Latter-day Saints, and they will be judged by it, and you will be judged by it. [In Conference Report, October 1919, 146]

Joseph Fielding Smith also said:

In my judgment there is no book on earth yet come to man as important as the book known as the Doctrine and Covenants, with all due respect to the Book of Mormon, and the Bible, and the Pearl of Great Price, which we say are our standards in doctrine. The book of Doctrine and Covenants to us stands in a peculiar position above them all.

I am going to tell you why. When I say that, do not for a moment think I do not value the Book of Mormon, the Bible, and the Pearl of Great Price, just as much as any man that lives; I think I do. I do not know of anybody who has read them more, and I appreciate them; they are wonderful; they contain doctrine and revelation and commandments that we should heed; but the Bible is a history containing the doctrine and commandments given to the people anciently. That applies also to the Book of Mormon. It is the doctrine and the history and the commandments of the people who dwelt upon this continent anciently.

But this Doctrine and Covenants contains the word of God to those who dwell here now. It is our book. It belongs to the Latter-day Saints. More precious than gold, the Prophet says we should treasure it more than the riches of the whole earth. I wonder if we do? If we value it, understand it, and know what it contains, we will value it more than wealth; it is worth more to us than the riches of the earth. [Doctrines of Salvation, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 3:198–99]

The explanatory introduction gives us wonderful insight to what is contained in this collection of divine revelations and inspired declarations on the establishment and

regulation of the kingdom of God on earth in the latter days. Now let me quote from two of the paragraphs in the explanatory introduction:

The book of Doctrine and Covenants is one of the standard works of the Church in company with the Holy Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the Pearl of Great Price. However, the Doctrine and Covenants is unique because it is not a translation of an ancient document, but is of modern origin and was given of God through his chosen prophets for the restoration of his holy work and the establishment of the kingdom of God on the earth in these days. In the revelations one hears the tender but firm voice of the Lord Jesus Christ, speaking anew in the dispensation of the fulness of times; and the work that is initiated herein is preparatory to his second coming, in fulfillment of and in concert with the words of all the holy prophets since the world began.

Then, in the next-to-last paragraph, it states:

In the revelations the doctrines of the gospel are set forth with explanations about such fundamental matters as the nature of the Godhead, the origin of man, the reality of Satan, the purpose of mortality, the necessity for obedience, the need for repentance, the workings of the Holy Spirit, the ordinances and performances that pertain to salvation, the destiny of the earth, the future conditions of man after the resurrection and the judgment, the eternity of the marriage relationship, and the eternal nature of the family. Likewise the gradual unfolding of the administrative structure of the Church is shown

with the calling of bishops, the First Presidency, the Council of the Twelve, and the Seventy, and the establishment of other presiding offices and quorums. Finally, the testimony that is given of Jesus Christ—his divinity, his majesty, his perfection, his love, and his redeeming power—makes this book of great value to the human family and of more worth than the riches of the whole earth.

Thus we see how carefully the Lord is preparing every detail to carry out the full plan He has designed for the guidance of His children on their journey through mortality. The population growth indicates He is sending many more of His spirit children to earth to have a mortal experience. Technology makes travel and communication accessible to all corners of the earth, and, most important, He is protecting and preserving His holy scriptures for our guidance.

My encouragement to you tonight is to study the doctrines of the Lord's Church. With all the mountains of information being fed to the world today, how comforting it is to know that the Lord has preserved His dealings with His children as contained in His holy scriptures. Here is our foundation of truth. It will stand the test of time. It is the doctrine and His revealed covenants we must take upon ourselves that will lead us back to His presence. It is the only course that will lead to life eternal, which is surely the objective of each of us. This is my witness to you in the name of our Lord and Savior, even Jesus Christ, amen.