

Audacious Faith: Appreciating the Unique Power and Singular Appeal of LDS Doctrine

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The International Center for Law and Religion Studies officially began on January 1, 2000. The choice of date was purposeful, coinciding with the beginning of a new millennium. It also makes it easy for us to remember the answer when we are asked how long the center has been operating.

In my role as associate director and now director of the center, I interact on an almost daily basis with people from around the world of almost every imaginable religious background—and with many who are not religious at all. Occasionally, usually at a reception or dinner toward the end of a conference, I am asked to explain something about what Mormons believe. Usually someone will want to know what is unique and distinctive about the Church or how it fits with other Christian denominations.

I have come to welcome opportunities like these because they give me a chance to talk about not only similarities between The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and other faiths but also some of the things that make us different. It is these differences—as well as a few of the similarities—that I would like to speak of today.

Audacious Faith

I have entitled my remarks “Audacious Faith: Appreciating the Unique Power and Singular Appeal of LDS Doctrine.” The *Oxford English*

Dictionary defines the word *audacious* as “daring, bold, confident, intrepid.”¹ I have come to believe that many basic LDS doctrines are audacious in this sense.

A Peculiar People

I remember when I was a boy being taught to take pride in the things that make us different. We were taught that Mormons are and should be “a peculiar people”² and that we were to be in the world but not of it.³

But in the second half of my life, which coincides with the entire life of most in this room, it seems to me that we as a church have become better at explaining and are more inclined to emphasize our similarities with other Christian churches. This is an understandable part of an effort of the Church and its people to be viewed as less odd and more like others. As recently as Mitt Romney’s presidential campaigns, the Church and its members were still expected to address the tired, old question of whether Mormons are Christians.

We have sometimes found ourselves in exasperation repeating the name of the Church: The

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Church of *Jesus Christ* of Latter-day Saints. The Church has even changed its logo to emphasize the centrality of Jesus Christ. I, for one, welcome this renewed emphasis on Jesus Christ and His Atonement.

But it is also true that some of our understandings of even basic doctrines are quite distinctive.

The Premortal Existence

I learned this fact as a freshman at Georgetown University. I was assigned to a dormitory called Darnall Hall and a roommate named Tom Warner, who was a good Catholic boy from Queens, New York. His father was a police officer, and Tom was the first person in his family to go to college. He and I became fast friends, and soon I felt that perhaps it was no accident that we had found ourselves as roommates.

One night while we were lying on our cots, I asked him, “Tom, do you think we knew each other in the premortal existence?”

His bedside light snapped on, and he looked at me incredulously: “The premortal existence—what’s that?”

I answered casually, “You know, the pre-earth life, where we lived as spirit children of our Heavenly Father.”

Now he was looking at me like I was from another planet or, perhaps more likely, as if I were a member of a strange religious cult, as others on our dormitory floor had already warned him.

“There is no such thing as a premortal existence,” he said, “and if there is, I wasn’t there.” His life, he explained, began at conception. Then the light snapped off.

I was stunned. I thought of myself as a reasonably sophisticated and well-educated person, but I had no idea how unique and unusual the doctrine of the premortal existence is. I had thought it was a shared part of Christian heritage, and although I believe the doctrine has a power and appeal that is very strong, and although there is scriptural and other evidence that many early Christians embraced the doctrine of the premortal existence,⁴ it is not a part of orthodox Christian or Protestant theology.⁵

My law school colleague Dean D. Gordon Smith joined the Church as a student here at BYU. The premortal existence, he says, is one of the doctrines that first gripped him. As he explained it:

Even when I was a very young man, questions about cosmic justice occupied my mind, and the teachings about the plan of salvation made sense of a world that seemed unjust and inequitable. Equipped with even a basic understanding of the premortal existence, I can view the varied circumstances of the people in this world neither as a product of chance nor as a reward or punishment for prior behavior but instead as part of a grand plan of learning designed by a loving God. This understanding helps me to remain optimistic that even our deepest trials and most profound struggles have meaning and purpose.

If you think about it, it is an audacious claim that we as human beings are coeternal with God,⁶ that we existed with Him through the eternities, and that this earth life is but the middle act in a three-act play,⁷ with premortal and postmortal life bookending and giving meaning to mortal life.

The Godhead

Consider another very basic Mormon doctrine: the nature of the Godhead. A few years ago at the BYU Law School, we were hosting a conference on religious iconography. An orthodox Christian priest from Oxford University had been invited to participate. He was an imposing fellow who wore dark robes, had a long beard, and wore a heavy cross around his neck. He explained that as part of his preparation for coming to Provo, he had decided to do some homework about what Mormons believe. He didn’t want a dry academic account, so he called the Mormon missionaries and invited them over. Can you imagine how nervous they must have been?

He described them as earnest and polite and a little naïve—a description with which many of us can probably relate. He explained:

I asked them to tell me what was unique and different about the Mormon Church, and they began

to tell me about how Joseph Smith as a teenager was visited by God the Father and Jesus Christ. Then they showed me a truly remarkable piece of religious iconography. It was a picture of God and Jesus, depicted as two men in white robes and with white hair, standing in the air, with Joseph on the ground leaning back in astonishment.

Like me, you can probably picture the exact illustration from the Gospel Art Kit. Then he projected it onto the screen.

“What a remarkable piece of religious iconography,” he said, “depicting God and Jesus Christ as two men with bodies.” This, he explained, was a complete recalculation of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

I have to admit I had never thought of this illustration as noteworthy religious iconography. But think about it: it depicts, in an illustration a child can understand, something profound about the nature of God and Jesus Christ.

God is not a distant, abstract being without body parts or passions; He is a perfect and exalted and embodied man. The implications of this doctrine are rather stunning. When Mormons quote from Genesis that man is created “in the image of God,”⁸ that we are His children, it is not a metaphor; it is a rather audacious claim about the nature of God and the nature of man.

The Nature of God

Joseph Smith often taught that the most important thing for us to understand is the true nature of God. Only then, he taught, can we understand the true nature of man. Doctrine and Covenants 130:22 states:

The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit. Were it not so, the Holy Ghost could not dwell in us.

In the King Follett Sermon, recorded in April 1844, only a few months before he died, Joseph said:

God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! . . .

These are incomprehensible ideas to some, but they are simple. It is the first principle of the gospel to know for a certainty the character of God, and to know that we may converse with Him as one man converses with another.⁹

This view of God is so audacious that it is dismissed as blasphemous by some and as unbelievable by others. But it is one of the most simple, elegant, and brilliant truths of the restored gospel. God is our Father, and His work and His glory is to bring us home to Him.¹⁰

Brigham Young put it this way:

When you . . . see our Father, you will see a being with whom you have long been acquainted, and He will receive you into His arms, and you will be ready to fall into His embrace and kiss Him . . . , you will be so glad and joyful.¹¹

Human Nature

Along with its remarkable teachings about the nature of God, Mormon doctrine propounds one of the most optimistic and progressive understandings of human nature that exists in any religious or philosophical account of what it means to be human. This understanding requires us to think positively about ourselves and each other. In Joseph Smith’s understanding, not only is God more like us, but we are more like God and are oriented to become even more like God than in many other Christian understandings. Thus for Mormons it is more than metaphor when Christ appealed in His Intercessory Prayer: “That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.”¹²

For those, like me, who may be inclined as a matter of disposition toward melancholy, the account of who we are as human beings and who we may become, which we are taught in the restored gospel, is a powerful antidote to pessimism or discouragement.¹³ It is audacious to believe that God uses the simple things of the

world (us) to confound the wise. It is audacious to believe that God loves broken things (including us and, in particular, our hearts) and that it is from the crooked timber of humanity (again us) that God accomplishes His ends. It is audacious to believe that when we come unto Him, God gives and shows us our weaknesses that we may be humble and that then, through our faith in Him, He will make weak things strong.¹⁴ It is audacious to believe that we are His children.

The Restoration

When I am asked how Mormons fit in with other Christians, I usually emphasize the idea of restoration. I explain that we believe that when Christ was on the earth, He established His Church and gave priesthood authority to the apostles to continue His work after He was gone. In time the doctrines were changed and the priesthood authority was lost. When Joseph Smith received priesthood authority from John the Baptist and Peter, James, and John, it was a restoration of the priesthood authority that existed when Christ had established His Church on the earth. Today the Church is led by apostles and prophets, just as it was when Jesus set up His Church. To be sure, these are audacious claims.

A few years ago I was sitting in a café in Istanbul overlooking the great Hagia Sophia, now a museum and before that a mosque and before that a Christian church dating back to the year 537.

I was explaining to a Muslim friend that Mormons are “restoration Christians.” He is a law professor and is translating one of my books into Turkish. After listening to my explanation, he looked at me and said, “I like that. I think I’m a restoration Muslim; I’m just waiting for the restoration.”

The Standard of Truth

The Prophet Joseph understood that what he claimed to have experienced was almost unbelievable. Near the end of his life he said, “I don’t blame any one for not believing my history. If I had not experienced what I have, I would not have believed it myself.”¹⁵ But Joseph had no choice but to believe

what he had seen. As he put it, “For I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I do it.”¹⁶

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland reminded us that it is remarkable that Joseph never once in his life wavered in his testimony, even when he was facing death.¹⁷

But let us recognize the audacity of Joseph’s claims and the confidence with which he made them. In the Wentworth Letter, in which Joseph was asked to provide a sketch of the basic history and beliefs of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Joseph wrote, in addition to the Articles of Faith, what has come to be known as the Standard of Truth.

Consider the audacity of what he wrote, keeping in mind that this was written in the year 1842, two years before his death at a time when the Church probably had fewer than 25,000 members:

*The standard of truth has been erected: no unhallowed hand can stop the work from progressing, persecutions may rage, mobs may combine, armies may assemble, calumny may defame, but the truth of God will go forth boldly, nobly, and independent till it has penetrated every continent, visited every clime, swept every country, and sounded in every ear, till the purposes of God shall be accomplished and the great Jehovah shall say the work is done.*¹⁸

We should not be surprised when self-righteous evangelical atheists reserve a special chapter in their book of contempt for the Church. If the very idea and existence of God is ridiculous and irrational, then the testimony of an embodied God who is the Father of our spirits, whose heart beats in sympathy with ours, and who cries over our suffering and weeps with us must be rejected as especially ludicrous.¹⁹

Critics

Lehi’s dream of the tree of life includes the powerful image of the “great and spacious building” floating as if it were in the air.²⁰ I sometimes think of the Internet, with its capacity for scorning and flaming others, as the modern equivalent.

What I don't understand is why we would think that those who point fingers of scoffing derision and mocking contempt are our friends or have our best interests at heart. Derision and contempt, scoffing and scorn, may have been the stock-in-trade of the cool kids in high school, but aren't we ready to be done with such immature attitudes toward others and the things they hold sacred? There are plenty of religious beliefs held by others with which I do not agree, but it would not occur to me that I am helping someone to the truth by blaspheming, mocking, scorning, or ridiculing their beliefs. Let scoffers scoff, but don't mistake them for friends or for seekers of truth and understanding.

Noncreedal Christianity

I also sometimes emphasize that Mormons are noncreedal Christians. Joseph often distinguished The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from other Christian faiths by noting that the Church rejected Christian creeds. The most influential creeds during Joseph's lifetime included the Westminster Confession of Faith, which declared that God "is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions."²¹ From the First Vision, Joseph knew this to be mistaken. He thought creeds were too limiting of our search and recognition of truth. Indeed, in his expansive imagination, he asserted that the Church embraced all truth, from whatever source. As Joseph Smith put it:

*Mormonism is truth; and every man who embraced it felt himself at liberty to embrace every truth: consequently the shackles of superstition, bigotry, ignorance, and priestcraft, falls at once from his neck; and his eyes are opened to see the truth.*²²

This is truly audacious. The heavens were opened to Joseph, and he received visions and the gift of translation. Yet he studied German so that he could read Martin Luther's translation of the Bible, Hebrew so that he could better comprehend the Old Testament, and Egyptian because it was related to the language of the Nephites. Virtually

everywhere he settled during his ministry, the Prophet Joseph built or planned to build a temple, and next to it he built or planned to build a university.

Congregationalism

Another audacious component of Mormon doctrine is the idea that there is no professional clergy in the Church. We are all expected to be ready and worthy to receive a call to serve in whatever position. Sometimes church seems like what Elder Neal A. Maxwell described as a "laboratory of life,"²³ and sometimes, like when I was asked to play the piano as a missionary in Japan, it feels more like "amateur hour." The Holy Spirit does not necessarily make us a competent organist or bishop.

I love that there is no corporate ladder that we are climbing in the Church. I am grateful that my daughter Ella had a nursery leader who was a former stake president and who adored her and taught her in powerful and simple ways that she is a child of God. I am grateful that another daughter, Sophie, was loved by another member of our ward, a former regional representative, who often asked to hold her during church and who would tell her parents that this little baby was an old soul with incredible wisdom and depth. And you know what? He was right. And I am grateful that our son, Elliot, had Young Men leaders who were very successful in their professional lives but who showed in word and especially in deed that it is possible to put Heavenly Father and our Savior first.

When we moved to Utah and I began teaching at BYU, my calling was to teach the five-year-olds, and I still have a vivid image of Max, who had stripped down to his underwear in the chapel where we were rehearsing for the Primary program and had flailed furiously as I carried him out to find his parents, screaming at the top of his lungs, "Bishop, save me!" Max, if you are here, I am sorry I was not a better Primary teacher.

Then I was called to be the bishop of a BYU student ward, and I felt a confidence and a success that had utterly eluded me as a teacher in the Primary. When I was released, I was called to

teach the teachers quorum in our home ward, and I went back to feeling like an abject failure, as the boys shot spit wads at me while I was writing on the blackboard. Now those boys are returned missionaries, and a few of them are probably trying to teach Primary kids or young men in the teachers quorum.

The Price of Mortality

Mormon doctrine also provides a unique perspective on the purpose of mortality, human suffering, and what is sometimes called “the problem of evil” by theologians: How is it that an all-powerful and all-loving God can permit so much evil and suffering in the world?

Let me share a story with you about the powerful and attractive answer that Latter-day Saint doctrine provides to this question.

My wife, Deirdre, and I were a two-tuition family at Yale, which is to say that it was not inexpensive. She completed her MBA on the same day I finished my law degree. In fact, we missed each other’s college convocations because they were held at the same time. Then we moved to Washington, DC, where Deirdre was working for Paul Mellon and his private art collection and I was clerking for a judge on the DC Circuit Court of Appeals.

My calling in our ward was Cub Scout leader, and there were two young brothers in my Webelos group. That summer their family was in a terrible car accident. One of the brothers was in critical condition for weeks, and I visited him in the hospital, where he was wrapped nearly head to toe in bandages. This was the early 1990s, when AIDS was not well understood, and this young boy contracted the HIV virus from a blood transfusion. It took many months, but he eventually recovered from most of his injuries, yet at that time being infected with the HIV virus was akin to a death sentence.

He was asked to speak in Church about what he had learned from his experience. Although he was only twelve, he gave what I think is the most profound and insightful address on the problem of evil that I have ever heard. He said:

Some people have asked me what I did wrong to deserve what happened to me. I’m not perfect, but I’m a good boy, and I know this is not something I deserved.

Others have said, “You must be a really strong person for God to give you such a difficult trial.”

I don’t feel strong, and anyway, I don’t believe God did this as a reward for my being particularly righteous.

No, I don’t think this happened because I’m particularly bad or particularly good. I believe it happened because I’m mortal, and this is part of the price of mortality. We come to earth, we exercise our agency, and other people exercise theirs, and sometimes we hurt each other, and sometimes accidents happen.

Think about that—“the price of mortality.”

Let us return to the great Council in Heaven, when Heavenly Father laid out His plan for us and explained that a Savior would be necessary. Lucifer came forward with his own plan that he claimed would save everyone. We often emphasize the distinction between moral agency, which was the defining feature of Heavenly Father’s plan, and coercion, which was the defining feature of Lucifer’s plan. But as Terryl and Fiona Givens have reminded us, it may not have been the prospect of agency that led a third of the host of heaven to follow Lucifer; perhaps it was the clear and vivid understanding of the pains and suffering that are an inevitable part of exercising that agency in mortal life. Perhaps it was not freedom to choose that was so daunting but a full appreciation of the consequences that follow from moral agency—our own and that of others.²⁴

The Closeness and Distance of God

In the doctrine of the premortal existence we learn something profound about the character of God. He wants us to experience the full range of human life, including the extremes of human suffering that mortality entails, not because He wants or wills our suffering but because He wants and wills our growth and development. He has provided a blueprint and road map—involving the Savior, His Atonement, the ordinances of the gospel, obedience, and repentance—for us to return to Him.

One of the audacious things Joseph Smith taught was that God is close, not far, and that the heavens are open, not closed, but that did not mean that Joseph had easy access to God at every moment. In a way, and to an extent that might seem paradoxical, there were times when Joseph felt alone, confused, and uncertain about what God's intentions or desires were.²⁵ God did not save Joseph from the pains of mortality: Joseph lost children, was unjustly imprisoned, saw his people persecuted and driven from their homes as he watched powerlessly from prison, and was ultimately murdered by a mob that likely included people whom he had counted as friends.

But Joseph taught that God is with us—by our side—and that His love and sympathy are fully extended to us in all our extremities. He does not leave us alone or comfortless, even when we feel alone and in need of comfort. As disciples of Christ, we must be prepared to stand alone, although we are never really alone.²⁶ God is powerful and “mighty to save,”²⁷ but He also refrains from intervening too much in human affairs, lest we forfeit the full impact of the lessons of mortality.²⁸

Religious Freedom

The mission of the International Center for Law and Religion Studies is to promote freedom of religion and belief for all people in all places. This comes naturally because for Mormons, religious freedom is, quite literally, an article of faith.²⁹ It is also one of our most basic doctrines.³⁰

Religious freedom has powerful appeal even to those from religious traditions that are often thought of as being suspicious of religious freedom. A friend of mine, Lena Larsen, is a Muslim from Norway.³¹ Recently Lena told me she reads the Koran every year during Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting.

“Each time I find something different,” she said, echoing my own view about the value of rereading the Book of Mormon.

During one recent reading she noticed a powerful defense of religious freedom in the story of Noah. We are familiar with Noah and the ark

from the Old Testament and Sunday School, but there is a version in the Koran as well. In that telling of the story, Noah had a rebellious son who wouldn't get on the ark. Even when the rain was falling, his son scrambled up a mountain as the ark floated by, and Noah pled with his son to get on board.

Noah said, “O my son, come aboard with us and be not with the disbelievers.”³²

The exchange involved an Arabic term that is intimate and endearing: *yabunayya*, which is a very sweet and caring way of saying “O my son.”

Noah's son replied, “I will take refuge on a mountain to protect me from the water.”³³

Noah, Lena said to me sadly, let his son go. “When I read these verses,” she said, “I feel Noah's pain. As a caring father, he wants the best for his son, but he has to accept that the son chooses his own destiny.” On a personal level, Lena told me, this means that “religious freedom includes the right for every individual to choose freely.”

Similarities with Other Religions

Many of the truths of the restored gospel find interesting expression in the beliefs of other people.

For example, my daughter Ella and I were visiting the sacred Daoist mountain of Wudang in China. As we climbed up the mountain toward the Dayue celestial palace, we noticed the railings were covered in padlocks. One interesting feature of these padlocks was that they did not have a keyhole or a combination. Once you locked them, they could not be unlocked. Our guide explained in halting English, “Honeymoon lovers will carve their names on the lock and then lock it to the railing so that their love will last forever. Or someone will engrave the name of a grandparent who has died so that they can be locked together for eternity.” This, of course, reflects the deep desire for belonging and connection that we see realized in the sealing ordinances of the temple.

A few weeks ago at a conference at Oxford University, a distinguished Jewish professor from Israel, Asher Maoz, expressed the amazement he

felt when visiting Temple Square and seeing a depiction of the temple’s baptismal font. He noted the similarities with the Jewish *mikveh* bath, which is a washing and immersion ritual in the Jewish faith that is used in the ceremony for when someone converts to Judaism.³⁴

I have been helping organize programs in Myanmar (also known as Burma) in partnership with a leading Buddhist monk, a Catholic cardinal, and the Myanmar Council of Churches. In August I was at a Buddhist pagoda in Bagan, Myanmar, where there was a large statue of the Buddha. When I was looking up at him from close range, his facial expression was stern; at thirty feet back he had a slight smile; and further back still, from the very back of the large room, he appeared to be smiling broadly.

My Buddhist friend explained, “The rich and powerful would pray in front, and Buddha looks down at them sternly; the shopkeepers and professionals (including the professors, she said pointedly) were in the middle, and Buddha has a slight smile for them; and the poorest farmers and peasants would pray from the back, and Buddha felt closest and most warmly toward them.”

I couldn’t help recalling the scriptural injunction that the first will be last and the last will be first in the kingdom of heaven.³⁵

Recently I was at the magnificent Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, Myanmar, with Anshin Thondara, who is a Buddhist monk I admire greatly. I asked him what he thinks about when he prays. He told me he reflects on the character traits of Buddha—his compassion, his wisdom, his patience, and his love—and tries to implant them in his heart. This has affected my prayers and my meditation, as I now pray to inculcate specific traits of the Savior.³⁶

With Full Purpose of Heart

Recently I was watching carpool karaoke on YouTube from an episode of *The Late Late Show with James Corden* that featured the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Corden complimented Flea for his skill as a bass player, saying that he admired how committed he was to his playing.

Flea brightened noticeably and said that it was something he had learned from reggae artist Bob Marley. He quoted from a book Marley had written, saying, “The only thing that really mattered when you’re playing music was the motivation and the intensity and commitment to what you were doing in the moment.” This was the key, Flea said, to his success as a rock musician.³⁷

I have been thinking about being fully committed. In the gospel context, being fully committed is often expressed as being engaged “with full purpose of heart.” The Book of Mormon speaks of the importance of following the Savior “with full purpose of heart, acting no hypocrisy and no deception before God, but with real intent.”³⁸

I love the verse in 3 Nephi in which the Savior said:

*O ye house of Israel whom I have spared, how oft will I gather you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, if ye will repent and return unto me with full purpose of heart.*³⁹

Judge Wallace

Not long ago I participated in a two-week training program on religion and the rule of law in China. The students in the class were professors, graduate students, religious leaders, judges, and government officials from all over China. The faculty members consisted of about a dozen law professors and judges from eight or ten different countries. We had invited Judge Clifford Wallace, an emeritus chief judge of the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, to participate.

Judge Wallace has visited China at least once a year since 1974 and is well known throughout the country. He joined the Church as a young adult and has served as a stake president and temple president in San Diego.

One of the students asked Judge Wallace what his religious beliefs were and how they affected his work as a judge.

Judge Wallace answered with the textbook answer I have heard from many U.S. judges—that his religious beliefs do not affect his work as a judge because he has taken an oath to uphold and

follow the Constitution and the laws of the United States.

The student pressed, asking, “But what are your personal religious beliefs?”

Judge Wallace answered in a way that made a deep impression on me. “I’m a Mormon,” he said, “a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” He paused for a moment and then continued: “And I’m a believing and faithful member of my church. I really believe it. I don’t just believe part of it or believe it some of the time. I believe all of it all of the time. It teaches me that we are all created in the image of God and that we are all His children. It teaches me that I have to love and show respect to everyone.”

Ironic Distance and Skeptical Detachment

I think our era is often marked by those who hold something back, who maintain “ironic distance” or “skeptical detachment.” Some of us are like little chicks, running hither and fro. But I believe that what Flea said about being a rock musician is just as true of us when we are trying to live the gospel: If we are not fully committed, we will be overcome with doubt or performance anxiety. We can’t be too worried about how we look. If we are fully committed, we will live fully, joyfully, and audaciously. We can dance as if no one is watching.

Earlier this month, after spending the better part of a week at BYU, a scholar from Lebanon told me why he thought Mormons were going to be so successful in the coming century: “Young Mormons are going to get educations, get married, and have children, while the rest of America is going in a different direction.”

He probably has an exaggerated sense of how different we are from the rest of the culture, but in the world in which we live, it is actually quite radically countercultural to do these rather ordinary-seeming things. In a country in which almost half of all children are born to single mothers,⁴⁰ we can be peculiar people by getting an education, getting and staying married, and having and raising responsible and respectful children.

Audacious Faith

Like Judge Wallace, I too count myself as a believer—someone fully committed and someone who strives to live the gospel with full purpose of heart. Everything I think and everything I believe is probably in some way affected by my faith. I believe in the power of love because of my faith in a Heavenly Father who loves His children. I believe in truth because I believe in a God who is beholden to truth. I believe in goodness and beauty and in light and right because I believe that God is the Creator of this universe and that He radiates these characteristics.⁴¹

I believe Joseph Smith when he said that LDS doctrine embraces all truth and that there are great and marvelous things yet to be revealed. I believe we should strive to be a peculiar people. I love the truths that can be found in other religions, but I believe in the unique and singular restoration of Christ’s Church, with living apostles and prophets and with priesthood authority, which authorizes those agents to act with the authority of God.

Joseph Smith revealed a tremendous volume of holy writ. Recently I have been reading the same chapter of scripture, preferably out loud, each day for a month as I have tried to really internalize the scriptures. Each month I choose a new chapter. This month I have been reading section 93 of the Doctrine and Covenants. If you want to know what I mean by audacious faith, try reading section 93 every day for a month.

It is audacious to believe that God has a tangible, perfected body, that He communicates with His children today, and that His Church has been restored and is led by prophets and apostles. It is audacious to believe that we can receive personal revelation pertinent to our own lives and that of our family; that the priesthood has been restored to the earth; and that families can be sealed and bound together in cords that tie past, present, and future generations into eternal relationships. It is audacious to believe that God is our Father—really our Father—and that we are His children—really His children. We have every reason to be

fearless and bold, confident and courageous in our audacious faith.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “audacious” (definition 1a), oed.com/view/Entry/13010?redirectedFrom=audacious#eid. There is a secondary meaning of the word *audacious*: that which is “unrestrained by, or setting at defiance, the principles of decorum and morality” or even being “presumptuously wicked, impudent, [and] shameless” (see *OED*, s.v. “audacious” [definition 2]). Occasionally Mormons, especially in the Prophet Joseph’s day, were accused of being audacious in this sense as well. But the audacity I want to discuss is a trait that reflects being fearless and bold, confident and courageous.

2. Deuteronomy 14:2: “For thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God, and the Lord hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth.”

See also Psalm 135:4: “For the Lord hath chosen Jacob unto himself, and Israel for his peculiar treasure.”

3. The night before His crucifixion, the Savior prayed:

I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil.

They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. . . .

As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. [John 17:15–16, 18]

4. The apostles assumed there was a premortal existence when they questioned Jesus in John 9:2 about the possibility that it was due to his own sin that a man was born blind: “And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?” Terryl L. Givens explained:

Of all the Christian doctrines Mormonism purported to restore, few have been so thoroughly eclipsed in Christian history as the soul’s pre-mortal existence.

Both Semitic and Greek sources fed into early church traditions of ante-mortal humans that were widespread though not universal. The pseudepigraphal Prayer of Joseph (first century CE) refers, as do other Jewish sources, to the pre-mortal existence of Israel’s patriarchs. From the same era, the Apocalypse of Abraham (70–150 CE) describes “a multitude of tribes who existed previously” along with “the ones I have prepared to be born of [Abraham] and to be called my people.” Even more authoritative—especially in the early Christian centuries—was the Wisdom of Solomon, dating from the first or second century BCE, and included in the first known listing of Christian canonical writings, the Muratorian Canon of the second century. The author notes that “As a child I was naturally gifted, and a good soul fell to my lot; or rather, being good, I entered an undefiled body.” [Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 147–48 (internal footnotes omitted)]

5. A few years later, when I told Deirdre, the Catholic girl I was falling in love with, about the premortal existence, I took it even worse when she laughed out loud at me. But Deirdre, who joined the Church three years later and is now my eternal partner, will tell you that the doctrine of the premortal existence was one of the things that took hold of her heart and would not let her go.

6. See D&C 93:29: “Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be.”

7. President Boyd K. Packer said:

The plan of redemption, with its three divisions, might be likened to a grand three-act play. Act 1 is entitled “Premortal Life.” The scriptures describe it as our first estate (see Jude 1:6; Abraham 3:26, 28). Act 2, from birth to the time of resurrection, is “The Second Estate.” And act 3 is called “Life After Death” or “Eternal Life.” [“The Play and the Plan,” CES fireside for young adults, Kirkland, Washington, 7 May 1995]

8. Genesis 1:27: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.”

9. Joseph Smith, in *HC* 6:305; also in “The King Follett Sermon,” *Ensign*, April 1971.

10. See Moses 1:39: “For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.”

The Church’s explanatory essay on eternal life states:

Eternal life is the phrase used in scripture to define the quality of life that our Eternal Father lives. . . . Immortality is to live forever as a resurrected being. Through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, everyone will receive this gift. Eternal life, or exaltation, is to live in God’s presence and to continue as families (see D&C 131:1–4). Like immortality, this gift is made possible through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. However, to inherit eternal life requires our “obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel” (Articles of Faith 1:3). [Gospel Topics, s.v. “eternal life,” lds.org/topics/eternal-life]

11. *JD* 4:54–55.

12. John 17:21.

13. See, for example, Mormon’s words to his son Moroni, encouraging him to have hope even in the face of Nephite atrocities:

My son, be faithful in Christ; and may not the things which I have written grieve thee, to weigh thee down unto death; but may Christ lift thee up, and may his sufferings and death, and the showing his body unto our fathers, and his mercy and long-suffering, and the hope of his glory and of eternal life, rest in your mind forever. [Moroni 9:25]

14. See Ether 12:27:

And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.

15. Joseph Smith also said in the King Follett Sermon:

*You don’t know me; you never knew my heart. No man knows my history. I cannot tell it: I shall never undertake it. I don’t blame any one for not believing my history. If I had not experienced what I have, I would not have believed it myself. I never did harm any man since I was born in the world. My voice is always for peace. [HC 6:317; quoted in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 525]*

16. Joseph Smith—History 1:25:

I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two Personages, and they did in reality speak to me; and though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true; and while they were persecuting me, reviling me, and speaking all manner of evil against me falsely for so saying, I was led to say in my heart: Why persecute me for telling the truth? I have actually seen a vision; and who am I that I can withstand God, or why does the world think to make me deny what I have actually seen? For I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I do it; at least I knew that by so doing I would offend God, and come under condemnation.

17. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland said:

May I refer to a modern “last days” testimony? When Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum started for Carthage to face what they knew would be an imminent martyrdom, Hyrum read these words to comfort the heart of his brother:

“Thou hast been faithful; wherefore . . . thou shalt be made strong, even unto the sitting down in the place which I have prepared in the mansions of my Father.

“And now I, Moroni, bid farewell . . . until we shall meet before the judgment-seat of Christ” [Ether 12:37–38; see also D&C 135:5].

A few short verses from the 12th chapter of Ether in the Book of Mormon. Before closing the book, Hyrum turned down the corner of the page from which he had read, marking it as part of the everlasting testimony for which these two brothers were about to die. I hold in my hand that book, the very copy from which Hyrum read,

the same corner of the page turned down, still visible. Later, when actually incarcerated in the jail, Joseph the Prophet turned to the guards who held him captive and bore a powerful testimony of the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon. Shortly thereafter pistol and ball would take the lives of these two testators.

As one of a thousand elements of my own testimony of the divinity of the Book of Mormon, I submit this as yet one more evidence of its truthfulness. In this their greatest—and last—hour of need, I ask you: would these men blaspheme before God by continuing to fix their lives, their honor, and their own search for eternal salvation on a book (and by implication a church and a ministry) they had fictitiously created out of whole cloth?

. . . They were willing to die rather than deny the divine origin and the eternal truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. [“Safety for the Soul,” *Ensign*, November 2009]

18. Joseph Smith, “Church History,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (1 March 1842): 709; see also “The Wentworth Letter,” *HC* 4:540; and “The Wentworth Letter,” *Ensign*, July 2002.

19. But what if we are wrong and LDS doctrine is untrue, or what if we are wrong and God does not exist? I am willing to be wrong in this way if it means believing and treating others as though they are children of God, created in His image with the potential to become beings like unto a perfect and perfectly loving God. I would rather make the mistake of attributing meaning and love to a universe that is meaningless and indifferent than vice versa. And besides, I do not think we are wrong. I believe love is the most powerful force in the universe, and I am not sure we have any reason to believe love is real if we reject the existence of God.

20. 1 Nephi 8:26. Lehi said:

And I also cast my eyes round about, and beheld, on the other side of the river of water, a great and spacious building; and it stood as it were in the air, high above the earth.

And it was filled with people, both old and young, both male and female; and their manner of dress was exceedingly fine; and they were in the attitude of mocking and pointing their fingers towards those who had come at and were partaking of the fruit.

And after they had tasted of the fruit they were ashamed, because of those that were scoffing at them; and they fell away into forbidden paths and were lost. [1 Nephi 8:26–28]

21. Westminster Assembly, “Of God, and of the Holy Trinity,” chapter 2 in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646).

22. Letter from Joseph Smith to Isaac Galland, 22 March 1839, “Communications,” *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 4 (February 1840): 53; quoted in Givens, *Wrestling*, 38.

Joseph Smith also said, “The Latter-day Saints have no creed, but are ready to believe all true principles that exist, as they are made manifest from time to time” (*HC* 5:215; quoted in Givens, *Wrestling*, 38).

And, as paraphrased by Terryl L. Givens, the Prophet stated: “If the Presbyterians have any truth, embrace that. If the Baptists and Methodists have truth, embrace that too. Get all the good in the world if you want to come out a pure Mormon” (sermon given 23 July 1843; in Givens, *Wrestling*, 38; see *HC* 5:517 and *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, comp. and ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook [Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980], 234).

On another occasion Joseph said, “The first and fundamental principle of our holy religion is” to be free “to embrace all, and every item of truth, without limitation or without being circumscribed or prohibited by the creeds or superstitious notions of men, or by the dominations of one another” (letter from Joseph Smith to Isaac Galland, *Times and Seasons*, 54; quoted in Givens, *Wrestling*, 38).

Givens noted that Joseph pushed “in the direction of expansive addition rather than contracting reduction: ‘we don’t ask any people to throw away any good they have got we only ask them to Come & get more’” (*Wrestling*, 38; quoting Joseph Smith, 22 January 1843; see *HC* 5:259; see also *Words of Joseph*, 159).

23. Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 44. Elder Maxwell said:

Thus there ought to be expectations that in this laboratory of life we will actually see each other in the process of being remodeled, sometimes succeeding and sometimes failing. We will obviously be aware of others who are also in the “furnace of affliction.” However, we will not always have a smooth, ready answer to the question, “Why me?” “Why now?” “Why this?”—for as Moroni observed, “Ye receive no witness until *after* the trial of your faith.” (Ether 12:6; *emphasis added*.)

24. Terryl and Fiona Givens wrote:

The Mormon conception of the war in heaven has ill served us in the simplistic, caricatured forms it so often takes. More must have been involved than simple choice between freedom and coercion. Depriving the human family of agency and accountability could only have been tempting to sons and daughters of God if the alternative were unthinkably terrible. The most reasonable explanation of heavenly division was not over some vague risk of failure that we bravely accepted while others cravenly retreated. More likely, as [Congregationalist minister Edward] Beecher argued, was the very real, vivid, inevitable pageant of warfare, genocide, infant mortality, an almost universal anguish for sin and personal bereavement that, once unfolded to our eyes in celestial councils, threatened to derail the entire plan, drawing away a third of the heavenly hosts. [The Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 112–13]

25. See, for example, D&C 121:1–3:

O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place?

How long shall thy hand be stayed, and thine eye, yea thy pure eye, behold from the eternal heavens the wrongs of thy people and of thy servants, and thine ear be penetrated with their cries?

Yea, O Lord, how long shall they suffer these wrongs and unlawful oppressions, before thine heart shall be softened toward them, and thy bowels be moved with compassion toward them?

26. See, for example, John 14:18: “I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you.”

27. 2 Nephi 31:19:

And now, my beloved brethren, after ye have gotten into this strait and narrow path, I would ask if all is done? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; for ye have not come thus far save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save.

28. One of the most audacious beliefs of the Church is its understanding of heaven and the afterlife. Joseph Smith was ridiculed for rejecting the Christian conception of hell as a fire of brimstone. His vision of heaven, with its three degrees of glory, is a much sunnier place.

I was recently having a conversation with my Protestant friend Seng Mai Aung in Myanmar. I asked her what she thought heaven would be like, and she said there would be no families or relationships like we have on earth, but those who were saved would be subsumed into God’s love. The idea of being swallowed up into God’s love is in a way an attractive and comforting idea, especially in contrast with the pains and suffering of earthly life, but Joseph’s vision of heaven was very different. Human beings will retain their identities, and human relationships may endure. Heaven is not so much a place as a way of being and a set of relationships, familial and congregational. Every kingdom of glory is far superior to earth life, but even celestial life will be recognizably human: we will live in families, maintain relationships, and progress together.

This idea of being together with our families in eternal relationships is one of the audacious and appealing aspects of Mormon doctrine, but it is rather overwhelming. As a young missionary serving in Japan, my companion and I were teaching a beautiful family—a mother, a father, and two young children. Everything was going well. They were accepting gospel principles and were especially drawn to the idea of family home evening. They invited us over nearly every Monday so that we could have family home evening with them.

I thought it would be a good idea to prepare a lesson about eternal families. “Wouldn’t it be wonderful to know that you can be together with your

family forever?” I said. Then, looking at the father, I asked, “What would you think if it were possible that your marriage could last forever, not just until death?”

Something completely unexpected happened. He became uncomfortable and gave an equivocal answer. Having never been married, and seeing his apparently happy home life, I had assumed that he would want that relationship to last forever. But forever is a long time, and if our relationships are broken or unhealthy, the idea of them being eternal may not seem like such a good thing.

From the beginning Joseph was ridiculed for his doctrine that human beings are coeternal with God and have the capacity and destiny to become beings like unto our Father in Heaven. Some critics have ridiculed Mormons as “god makers.” But Jesus Himself was a god maker: He urged His disciples to be one, as He and His Father are one (see 3 Nephi 28:10 and D&C 35:2), and to become perfect (meaning complete) as He and His Father are perfect (see Matthew 5:48 and 3 Nephi 12:48); and He taught that we are “joint-heirs with Christ” of the kingdom of God (Romans 8:17). Joseph had the audacity and vision to understand that these promises are not metaphors or gestures but are to be taken literally.

29. The eleventh article of faith of the Church states:

We claim the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may.

30. Joseph Smith said:

The Saints can testify whether I am willing to lay down my life for my brethren. If it has been demonstrated that I have been willing to die for a “Mormon.” I am bold to declare before Heaven that I am just as ready to die in defending the rights of a Presbyterian, a Baptist, or a good man of any other denomination; for the same principle which would trample upon the rights of the Latter-day Saints would trample upon the

rights of the Roman Catholics, or of any other denomination who may be unpopular and too weak to defend themselves.

It is a love of liberty which inspires my soul—civil and religious liberty to the whole of the human race. [HC 5:498; see also *Teachings of Presidents: Joseph Smith*, 345]

Elder Bruce R. McConkie said:

Freedom of worship is one of the basic doctrines of the gospel. Indeed, in one manner of speaking it is the most basic of all doctrines, even taking precedence over the nature and kind of being that God is, or the atoning sacrifice of the Son of God, or the vesting of priesthood and keys and saving power in the one true church. By this we mean that if there were no freedom of worship, there would be no God, no redemption, and no salvation in the kingdom of God. [A New Witness for the Articles of Faith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 655; quoted in W. Cole Durham Jr., “The Doctrine of Religious Freedom,” BYU devotional address, 3 April 2001]

Religious freedom has a powerful appeal. Katrina Lantos Swett, an LDS member of the U.S. Commission on Religious Freedom, noted, “History is not kind to nor does it ultimately reward those who trample on the religious rights and freedoms of others” (“The State of Religious Freedom in the World,” *Clark Memorandum*, fall 2015, 6).

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland praised Swett’s “conspicuous devotion and unstinting service” in living the gospel (“Katrina Lantos Swett: A Guardian of Freedom,” *Clark Memorandum*, fall 2015, 11).

Joseph Smith said:

If I esteem mankind to be in error, shall I bear them down? No. I will lift them up, and in their own way too, if I cannot persuade them my way is better; and I will not seek to compel any man to believe as I do, only by the force of reasoning, for truth will cut its own way. [HC 5:499; quoted in *Teachings of Presidents: Joseph Smith*, 345]

31. Lena Larsen and I have worked together with a Lutheran colleague of hers, Tore Lindholm, for years on a program on sharia and human rights in Indonesia, or, as Tore said his skeptical colleagues described it, “fire and water.” This program, by the way, has just been expanded into a two-year master’s degree program at Muhammadiyah University in Indonesia.

32. Koran 11:42 (Saheeh International Translation):

And it sailed with them through waves like mountains, and Noah called to his son who was apart [from them], “O my son, come aboard with us and be not with the disbelievers.”

33. Koran 11:43:

[But] he said, “I will take refuge on a mountain to protect me from the water.” [Noah] said, “There is no protector today from the decree of God, except for whom He gives mercy.” And the waves came between them, and he was among the drowned.

34. See Judith Baskin, Shimon Gibson, and David Kotlar, s.v. “mikveh,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 14 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007), 225, go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?resultListType=RELATED_DOCUMENT&userGroupName=byuprovo&inPS=true&contentSegment=9780028660974&prodId=GVRL&isBOBIndex=true&docId=GALE|CX2587513881#225:

Mikveh, a pool or bath of clear water, immersion in which renders ritually clean. . . . Mikveh immersion is . . . obligatory for proselytes, as part of the ceremony of conversion.

35. See Matthew 20:16: “So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.”

36. We can learn much from other religious traditions. When I heard Anshin’s answer, I thought about my own prayers, which often resemble a

laundry list of things I am thankful for and an even longer list of petitions or requests. I was a little embarrassed that I didn’t spend time in my prayers thinking about and praying to be imbued with the character traits of our Heavenly Father and Savior. Recently in my prayers and as I meditate I have tried to focus on specific characteristics of Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ, and I pray that I may be endowed with a greater measure of these characteristics. Not surprisingly, when I looked into it, this was something Joseph Smith had understood.

37. “Red Hot Chili Peppers Carpool Karaoke,” *The Late Late Show with James Corden*, YouTube video, 13 June 2016, 6:45–7:23, [youtube.com/watch?v=cfudXO_vzWk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cfudXO_vzWk).

38. 2 Nephi 31:13:

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, I know that if ye shall follow the Son, with full purpose of heart, acting no hypocrisy and no deception before God, but with real intent, repenting of your sins, witnessing unto the Father that ye are willing to take upon you the name of Christ, by baptism—yea, by following your Lord and your Savior down into the water, according to his word, behold, then shall ye receive the Holy Ghost; yea, then cometh the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost; and then can ye speak with the tongue of angels, and shout praises unto the Holy One of Israel.

39. 3 Nephi 10:6.

40. Live births to unmarried women account for 40.2 percent of all births in the United States (see Brady E. Hamilton, Joyce A. Martin, and Michelle J. K. Osterman, “Births: Preliminary Data for 2015,” *National Vital Statistics Reports* 65, no. 3 [2 June 2016]: 10, [cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr65/nvsr65_03.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr65/nvsr65_03.pdf)).

41. I have a friend, Neville Rochow, who is a successful barrister from Australia and who joined the Church as a young adult. He told me that what initially grabbed him and would not let him go was the concept expressed in D&C 93:36 that “the glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth.”

Neville told me:

This harmonized with an eternity that articulates the highest in this life into an unending exploration of perfection: family and love. There is a beautiful coalition of absolutes: light, truth, intelligence, and love. Nothing had touched me in heart and mind with such power or wonderment. It captivated me in a way that I could not deny. All fused into the power of an eternal Atonement. It left indelible impressions on the soul and the heart. In short, once I understood this in the context of the Restoration, the result was conversion. That is why I have remained even when it was unfashionable, inconvenient, and unpopular.

I believe we are eternal beings, intelligences without beginning or end (see D&C 93:29), and also spirit children of our Heavenly Father created in His image, and that as His children our divine destiny is to become beings like unto Him. This does not mean we will ever supplant or become equal to God; He will always be our God and our Father. But the eternal pattern of parents and children is more like the mortal pattern of parents and children than many religious doctrines would have us believe.