



# Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel

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Volume 8 | Number 2

Article 4

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7-1-2007

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### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Samuelson, Cecil O. "Testimony of Jesus Christ." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 8, no. 2 (2007). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol8/iss2/4>

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President Cecil O. Samuelson

Courtesy of Mark A. Philbrick

# Testimony of Jesus Christ

*President Cecil O. Samuelson*

*President Cecil O. Samuelson is a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy and president of Brigham Young University.*

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*This address was given at the BYU Easter Conference on April 15, 2006.*

These Easter conferences have been wonderful, and today's is no exception. After accepting the invitation to speak, I began to think earnestly about what I might contribute to this remarkable program. As I reviewed the outstanding list of faculty and topics for today's conference and those of previous years, I concluded that my participation likely could not add much, with the possible exception of one consideration. I hope I might assist in our quest today by fulfilling my responsibility as a witness of the reality of the Resurrection and all events associated with it.

As you know, my calling as a Seventy is to "preach the gospel" and to be a witness of Jesus Christ (see D&C 107:25). Although my scholarship, such as it is, is largely in arenas far from the expertise of our speakers and the topics of today's presentations, my testimony is not distanced from them and is, I believe, germane to the Easter season.

In this regard, I would like to begin by relating some autobiographical learning events that have affected me significantly and seem appropriate to share. I shall not dwell on details, nor shall I mention other profound personal and sacred experiences that are vital to my having a firm testimony and an unreserved witness of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let me just assure you that what I know, I know clearly and more reliably than the many things that I have learned or understood through traditional study, experimentation in the laboratory, and life experiences.

I confess that I have always had a testimony of Jesus Christ and His mission. I have wondered about many things, but the reality of the Savior has never been one of those. The Brethren used to talk about believing blood more than they do today. Having been something of a geneticist for a period of my academic career, I believe that I largely inherited my believing blood, together with growing up in a supportive environment, and am grateful for that heritage, which has made much of my life so much easier.

As I have tried to analyze my testimony and what has strengthened it, I have concluded that study, faith, and obedience are critical to obtaining and sustaining a testimony, but there is something more. Let me attempt to explain what I mean by relating some personal experiences.

The first occurred some thirty years ago. By then, I was a returned missionary and had had several Church leadership experiences. I was young, but I was not really a rookie. As a stake president, I had chosen to speak about spiritual gifts in a stake conference because some questions had arisen on this topic among a few members of our stake. While I was speaking, I read these verses from the forty-sixth section of the Doctrine and Covenants: “For all have not every gift given unto them; for there are many gifts, and to every man is given a gift by the Spirit of God. To some is given one, and to some is given another, that all may be profited thereby. To some it is given by the Holy Ghost to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that he was crucified for the sins of the world” (vv. 11–13).

As I read that last verse, “To some it is given by the Holy Ghost to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that he was crucified for the sins of the world,” it came to me, with greater power than I had ever experienced, that I had been given that gift. It was not that I had not previously had a conviction about Jesus Christ and His unique and supernal role, because I had, as I have mentioned. It was the dramatic realization, confirmed by the Holy Ghost, that I indeed had this specific gift, which is not the routine possession of everyone else. I have never forgotten that moment.

The second experience followed just months after the first. My wife, Sharon, and I, with some good friends, had the privilege of going to Israel. We had a great time and visited most of the special and expected sites throughout the Holy Land. When we visited the Garden Tomb, we were not alone and, in fact, found ourselves in a long line waiting for our turn to look into the burial vault.

Our guide and the caretaker at the tomb was a retired British army colonel who was tall, slender, and ramrod-straight in his demeanor.

He was serving as a missionary for another denomination from England and clearly was a committed Christian with a well-developed sense of propriety and reverence. He asked for people to be respectful of this sacred site and to keep voices low because there were those in the area praying and meditating.

Just ahead of us in the line were a couple of American women with accents that made me think they were from a borough in our largest American city. They loudly commented about how much time the line was taking and how it was interfering with their planned shopping. The guide said nothing to them directly but was clearly a little irritated by them, and we were embarrassed by our fellow countrywomen. Their dialogue continued almost nonstop until they finally reached the opening of the tomb. The first one there said, "Why, Ethel, there is nothing in here!" Our wonderful British caretaker said with admirable restraint, "Madam, that is precisely the point!" My witness of the reality of the Resurrection was again clearly, but quietly and personally, confirmed for me that day.

Many, including those of other Christian faiths, believe in the Resurrection and the divinity of Jesus Christ. However, it is a special blessing to know that He is the Christ, the Savior and the Redeemer, and that He lives today.

The third experience I will relate occurred in the fall of 1997. I was serving as the Europe North Area President and living in England. One day I received a very nice letter from the Divinity School at the University of Nottingham inviting me to participate in a seminar series on "alternative religions." In an evening session each month, this group of clerics and graduate students in the ministry would invite a leader from another religious tradition to spend two hours with them. The format they suggested was that I might say anything I wished for the first half hour, and then the remaining hour and a half would be devoted to a question-and-answer session both on what was said and what they had previously read or wondered about. In other words, it would be open season!

My first inclination, candidly, was to think of whom else I might send to respond to this invitation. I add parenthetically that for a number of years, Nottingham University had been quite friendly to Latter-day Saints. Professor Douglas Davies had, until just a year or two before, been at Nottingham, and several of our British Church Educational System personnel had obtained graduate degrees in his program. By then, he had moved north to Durham University. For all the obvious reasons, I felt that I needed to respond and appear.

Accordingly, I arrived at the appointed time and place on campus and was treated quite graciously. As I entered the modest classroom, quite bleak by BYU standards, I noted that several of the approximately forty in attendance had missionary copies of the Book of Mormon on their desks with their Bibles and other papers. Several of the copies of the Book of Mormon had little yellow Post-it notes marking selected pages and passages. I sensed I was in for some serious discussion. I also had my scriptures, but my Bible was different from theirs. All that I saw on their tables were fairly recent revision or translation editions, and mine was the only King James Version I could see.

You can imagine much of what transpired. I took the first thirty minutes in telling them a little of our history, beginning with the First Vision, the visitations of the angel Moroni, the restoration of the priesthood, the translation of the Book of Mormon, the organization of the Church, and, briefly, our Church history in Great Britain. They listened courteously, most took some notes, and all waited patiently for the question-and-answer period. Virtually all seemed to know something about us, and I sensed they were serious in their desire to understand.

Their initial questions were kind and respectful and related to such things as their wonderment that my professional training was not in religion or theology, given my Church leadership assignment; that Latter-day Saints were so willing to respond to mission calls; and that we had really abandoned plural marriage—or had we?

Soon we got into doctrinal matters that focused on Latter-day Saint beliefs in continuing revelation, an open canon of scripture, a lay priesthood, and similar matters. We also discussed why Latter-day Saints do not accept the creeds and councils of other traditions and why we also believe an apostasy took place.

Several had marked the Book of Mormon passages that suggest that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are “one God.” They read to me the words of Abinadi in chapter 15 of Mosiah and wondered aloud if Abinadi did not actually believe in the Catholic Trinity. We talked of the Savior’s great Intercessory Prayer recorded in John 17 and other clarifying passages. It was clear that they thought my interpretation was quaint, but one opined that he could understand my confusion. We do not have time today to relate all of their questions in detail, but the discourse and our discussion were respectful, cordial, and rather wide ranging.

Then in the last half hour, we finally got to the question that I should have been expecting. It went something like this: In light of the many differences you and we have identified between your beliefs and ours, how do you justify calling yourselves Christians?

Because I had been so conditioned in our Latter-day Saint culture, I honestly thought that I had already spent an hour explaining our belief in Jesus Christ and His centrality to our theology and religious practice. At the moment of my growing frustration, I was helped by heaven in a way that had not occurred to me previously. I felt a spirit of calmness and comfort as a response to them formed within me.

I had already mentioned to the group my high regard for the King James Version and my appreciation for the role of England and its courageous reformers who made the Bible readily available to all of us. We had discussed our divergent views on the current utility of the King James Version and also the Joseph Smith Translation, which they described as curious.

Wanting to avoid any of these issues or distractions in my response to their central question, I asked our discussion leader if I might borrow his Bible to use in answering the question. He readily handed it to me. I then asked the group if I might answer the question posed to me by asking them a few brief questions first. They nodded in agreement.

I lifted a red-covered International Translation and, without opening it, asked if they accepted it as the word of God. Again, they nodded in assent.

I then asked three questions, asking them to answer only to themselves unless they wished to vocalize a response. The first was, “Do you accept your Bible’s version of the origins of Jesus Christ?” Some looked a little puzzled, and so I amplified by asking, “Do you believe that He was literally the physical Son of God the Father and Mary, a mortal mother?” Some nodded yes, some looked down, and some looked pained. I then told them that we, as Latter-day Saints, accept this biblical teaching without reservation.

The second question was, “Do you accept your Bible’s account of Jesus’s mortal ministry? This includes the miracles that He performed and the organization of His Church with Apostles having His authority to minister and administrate.” Again, I noticed the same general spectrum of mute responses as with the first question. As with the first query, my answer was the same: we accept the biblical account without qualification. We then had a brief aside on the Lord’s miracles, and several admitted to being unsettled as to their literal veracity.

The third question was then presented: “Do you accept your Bible’s account of Christ’s Passion [to use a term more familiar to them than to us], His experience in the Garden of Gethsemane, His Crucifixion on Golgotha, and His literal Resurrection on the third day?” A few remained passive, but several of the group now needed to speak.

Interestingly, the most agitated wanted to talk about the Resurrection as being only symbolic of new life such as in the spring when the flowers and trees come out and blossom.

It was obvious that many were troubled by the thought of a literal resurrection, and a couple of them even expressed doubts about individual life after death. After a few minutes of various opinions, I replied that we as Latter-day Saints fully accept the biblical account of the Resurrection of Jesus.

I further bore my testimony of its truthfulness and then asked my last question. "Given the answers to the questions I have just posed, who do you think deserves to be called Christian?" Again, there were various looks and no comments except from one graduate student who elbowed the previously vocal fellow next to her who had asked the question concerning our Christianity and said, "It looks like he got you there."

The time was up, and the moderator took back the floor with gracious expressions of thanks and best wishes. Several of the attendees made civil and generous comments, although I am not aware that anyone's previous convictions were altered. Three or four of the group lingered for a few minutes longer and expressed appreciation for our evening together as they had not understood how strongly we feel about the Savior. I do not tell this experience to be critical or to make light of the feelings and beliefs of these good people. I believe they were doing the best they could with the understanding that was theirs. I left them with increased appreciation for their general goodness. I also felt increased gratitude for the Holy Ghost and for my sustaining testimony of the Savior.

Two of them accepted my invitation to attend the open house for the new Preston England Temple, then under construction. At the visit to the temple open house, both of these new friends went out of their way to mention the clear evidence they saw in the artwork and other materials of our strong feelings about Jesus Christ.

I have not been invited to any of their baptisms into the restored Church, nor do I think that this has occurred. I do believe that what was most impressive and surprising to them about us and our theology is our testimony of the Savior.

Just last Sunday, I was introduced to an investigator who had come to the general session of stake conference where I was assigned. As we visited briefly, she asked if I was going to talk about Palm Sunday, it being Palm Sunday. I responded and told her I indeed planned to speak about the Savior and some of the events related to His Atonement, Crucifixion, and Resurrection. She seemed somewhat relieved

and reported that someone had told her that we do not worship the same Jesus others do. I told her that we worship the Living Christ and that she would hear several testimonies in music and talks that would demonstrate our convictions about and reverence for Him. That turned out to be the case, and I was grateful that it was so.

It did remind me of an experience of almost eight years ago. At that time, we were holding the open-house tours for the recently completed Preston England Temple immediately prior to the dedication services scheduled for a couple of weeks hence. One of our tour supervisors approached me with some anxiety and said that a known critic and antagonist of the Church was in one of the tour groups and that the guide of that group was a fine man but also a fairly recent convert with limited speaking and leadership experience. The plea to me was to go with the group and rescue him. Accordingly, I found the group and lingered near the back where I could observe all that transpired and hopefully render some assistance to our guide if necessary.

It was not long before the outspoken opponent tried to take over the tour. Our guide was doing a fine job and was explaining the centrality of Jesus Christ to our theology. The critic interrupted and said something like, “How do you claim to be Christians and you don’t even celebrate Holy Week?” Happily, I restrained myself and just listened. Our sweet guide, seemingly unruffled, just said, “Why sir, *every week* for us is Holy Week. Each Sabbath day we meet to partake of the sacred emblems of the sacrament, where we promise to always remember Him, to keep His commandments, and plead to always have His Spirit to be with us.” I thought that this was a splendid answer.

Unfortunately, the critic was not mollified, and he said, “Well, you don’t celebrate Good Friday like real Christians.” Our wonderful new Latter-day Saint guide then said, “For us, the day Jesus died was Bad Friday, and we give our attention to the day He was resurrected: Good Sunday, or Easter.” Another terrific answer. The man stayed a while longer but didn’t ask this great group leader any more questions.

As we moved through the temple and were introduced to the baptistry and then the other sacred rooms and spaces, it seemed to me that there was a special spirit this good man brought to all of his clear and thoughtful responses to sincere questions that were asked. He concluded with a brief but touching testimony of Jesus Christ and the Restoration. I hope for all of us that each week is Holy Week and that we recognize what a privilege it is to celebrate “Good Sunday,” or the Resurrection of the Lord.

As I have reflected on these experiences and others that I might relate, I have found new understanding in the words of the Prophet

Joseph, who said: “The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it.”<sup>1</sup>

Joseph Smith might have said that the fundamental principles of our religion are the *facts* or *evidence* concerning Jesus Christ, and I might not have initially appreciated any difference. But he did not choose those or other similar words. He said that the *testimonies* of the apostles and prophets concerning Jesus Christ provide the fundamental principles of our religion. I would likewise suggest that our own testimonies concerning Jesus Christ provide the basis of what is most dear to us.

Please do not misunderstand. Scholarship is essential and provides the framework to establish and protect our understanding of the unique mission and contributions of the Lord Jesus Christ. Without serious scholarship into the life and ministry of the Lord, our testimonies may be in peril or never established in the first instance. But scholarship alone does not provide the assurance that can come only from the true witness of the Holy Ghost. In fact, the nature of scholarship or research is that its conclusions are always tentative or incomplete, awaiting the next discovery, insight, or data. It is the testimony of Jesus, the spirit of prophecy (see Revelation 19:10), that brings full and unreserved confidence to our witness of Him.

We of all people welcome more knowledge and insight, but we also do not confuse even more robust understanding with the absolute conviction that can come only through the still, small voice whispered by the Holy Spirit. Thus, the testimonies of apostles and prophets, as well as our personal testimonies, are what cause us to be able to say without equivocation or reservation that Jesus is the Christ, our Savior and Redeemer, the Firstborn of the Father in the spirit world, and His Only Begotten Son in this mortal sphere.

That is why the fifteen living Apostles chose to share their testimonies in the wonderful document dated January 1, 2000, and entitled “The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” They might have written books, indeed several have, that outlined the basis for their faith, understanding, and scholarship about Jesus. Interestingly, they decided to record their testimonies in thirteen brief paragraphs held to one page that also includes room for all fifteen signatures. Let me share again what they have written. I commend it to you as I bear my testimony of it and of Him:

### The Living Christ

As we commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ two millennia ago, we offer our testimony of the reality of His matchless life and the infinite virtue of His great atoning sacrifice. None other has had so profound an influence upon all who have lived and will yet live upon the earth.

He was the Great Jehovah of the Old Testament, the Messiah of the New. Under the direction of His Father, He was the creator of the earth. "All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:3). Though sinless, He was baptized to fulfill all righteousness. He "went about doing good" (Acts 10:38), yet was despised for it. His gospel was a message of peace and goodwill. He entreated all to follow His example. He walked the roads of Palestine, healing the sick, causing the blind to see, and raising the dead. He taught the truths of eternity, the reality of our premortal existence, the purpose of our life on earth, and the potential for the sons and daughters of God in the life to come.

He instituted the sacrament as a reminder of His great atoning sacrifice. He was arrested and condemned on spurious charges, convicted to satisfy a mob, and sentenced to die on Calvary's cross. He gave His life to atone for the sins of all mankind. His was a great vicarious gift in behalf of all who would ever live upon the earth.

We solemnly testify that His life, which is central to all human history, neither began in Bethlehem nor concluded on Calvary. He was the Firstborn of the Father, the Only Begotten Son in the flesh, the Redeemer of the world.

He rose from the grave to "become the firstfruits of them that slept" (1 Corinthians 15:20). As Risen Lord, He visited among those He had loved in life. He also ministered among His "other sheep" (John 10:16) in ancient America. In the modern world, He and His Father appeared to the boy Joseph Smith, ushering in the long-promised "dispensation of the fulness of times" (Ephesians 1:10).

Of the Living Christ, the Prophet Joseph wrote: "His eyes were as a flame of fire; the hair of his head was white like the pure snow; his countenance shone above the brightness of the sun; and his voice was as the sound of the rushing of great waters, even the voice of Jehovah, saying:

"I am the first and the last; I am he who liveth, I am he who was slain; I am your advocate with the Father" (D&C 110:3-4).

Of Him the Prophet also declared: "And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him: That he lives!

"For we saw him, even on the right hand of God; and we heard the voice bearing record that he is the Only Begotten of the Father—

"That by him, and through him, and of him, the worlds are and were created, and the inhabitants thereof are begotten sons and daughters unto God" (D&C 76:22-24).

We declare in words of solemnity that His priesthood and His Church have been restored upon the earth—“built upon the foundation of . . . apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone” (Ephesians 2:20).

We testify that He will someday return to earth. “And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together” (Isaiah 40:5). He will rule as King of Kings and reign as Lord of Lords, and every knee shall bend and every tongue shall speak in worship before Him. Each of us will stand to be judged of Him according to our works and the desires of our hearts.

We bear testimony, as His duly ordained Apostles—that Jesus is the Living Christ, the immortal Son of God. He is the great King Immanuel, who stands today on the right hand of His Father. He is the light, the life, and the hope of the world. His way is the path that leads to happiness in this life and eternal life in the world to come. God be thanked for the matchless gift of His divine Son.<sup>2</sup>

Now, this is the wonderful, moving, and affirmative testimony of the First Presidency and the Twelve. We understand that their testimonies are of special significance because these fifteen men are “special witnesses” (see D&C 107:23). For many in the world, including some who are striving for testimonies themselves, the witness of the Apostles is essential because these seeking people are the “others [to whom] it is given to believe on their words [meaning their testimony of Jesus Christ], that they also might have eternal life if they continue faithful” (D&C 46:14).

I suppose some might think that because the scripture teaches that “To *some* it is given by the Holy Ghost to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that he was crucified for the sins of the world” (D&C 46:13; emphasis added), this must be an exclusive or restricted gift, perhaps even akin to the sectarian notion of predestination to salvation or damnation. Nothing could be further from the truth. While acquiring the testimony of Jesus may be easier for some than others, it is also abundantly clear that God wishes every person to have this witness and conviction personally.

Think of these remarkable words of counsel and promise given for our time in November 1831:

Wherefore, I the Lord, knowing the calamity which should come upon the inhabitants of the earth, called upon my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., and spake unto him from heaven, and gave him commandments;

And also gave commandments to others, that they should proclaim these things unto the world; and all this that it might be fulfilled, which was written by the prophets—

The weak things of the world shall come forth and break down the mighty and strong ones, that man should not counsel his fellow man, neither trust in the arm of flesh—

But that *every man* might speak in the name of God the Lord, even the Savior of the world;

That faith also might increase in the earth. (D&C 1:17–21; emphasis added)

What a wonderful thing it would be if every man and woman could have the strength and conviction of their witness that they could confidently testify of truth in the name of the Savior! What a worthy goal for each of us and for each person that we have the occasion to touch and strengthen!

Each of us who has a testimony of Jesus as the Christ has a heavy and great responsibility to live our lives so that our conduct will match our convictions. As I bear again my witness of the literal, living reality of the resurrected Savior in our day, I also pray that we will do all we can to build the testimonies of Jesus Christ in all with whom we are privileged to interact. Thanks to all of you who so magnificently and effectively testify of your knowledge and love of the Lord by the goodness of your example and precepts. This is His work, and He does watch over Israel. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. **RE**

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## Notes

1. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 3:30.

2. The First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve, “The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *Ensign*, April 2000, 2.