



7-1-2010

The Doctrine and Covenants: A Roundtable Discussion

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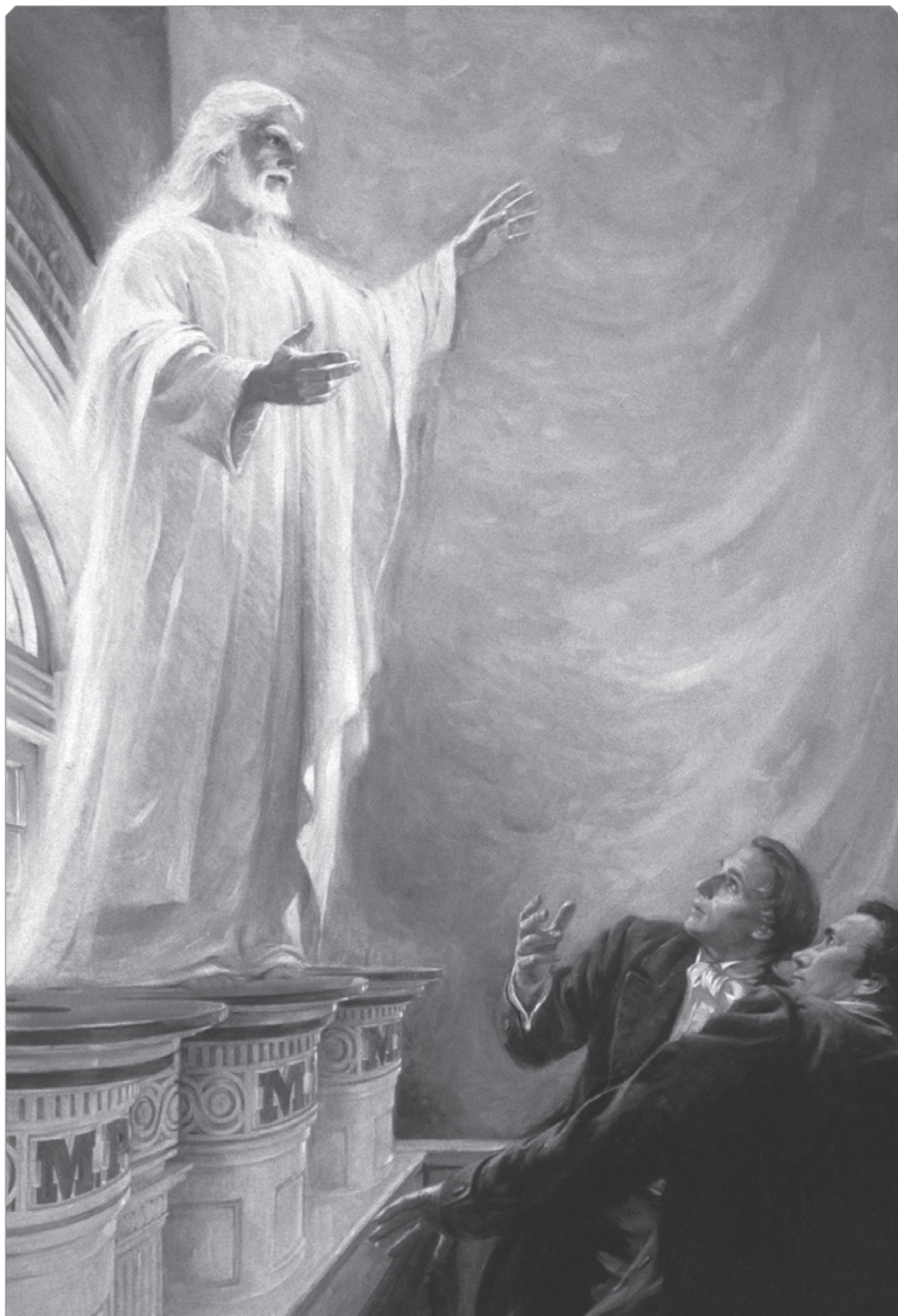


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BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Holzapfel, Richard N. holzapfel@byu.edu; Bennett, Richard E.; Black, Susan E.; Baugh, Alexander L. and Hedges, Andrew H. "The Doctrine and Covenants: A Roundtable Discussion." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 11, no. 2 (2010). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol11/iss2/17>

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The lesson of repentance and forgiveness is repeated numerous times throughout Church history, including in the famous vision in the Kirtland Temple in April 1836 when the Savior appeared to Joseph and Oliver.

The Doctrine and Covenants: A Roundtable Discussion

Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Richard E. Bennett, and Susan Easton Black are professors of Church history and doctrine at BYU. Alexander L. Baugh and Andrew H. Hedges are associate professors of Church history and doctrine at BYU.

***Holzapfel:** What do you think is an important topic, incident, or scripture in the Doctrine and Covenants?*

Baugh: Two important themes from the Doctrine and Covenants that really stand out for me are the Zion community Joseph Smith hoped to create, and then his efforts to create that Zion, including the element of consecration, in terms of bringing about temporal equality.

***Holzapfel:** Why do those two come to your attention?*

Baugh: The first thing that stands out in the early revelations is Joseph Smith's focus and effort to complete the translation and publication of the Book of Mormon. Once that was completed, the Saints needed an organizational structure. They pushed forward to get the Church organized. But then the next major focus was on a revision of the Bible. What was Joseph Smith doing during the summer of 1830? He was translating the Bible. What did he find while translating? Among other things, he produced revelatory information about Enoch. There are eight verses in Genesis chapters 4 and 5 of the King James Version of the Bible that mention Enoch (Genesis 4:17–18; 5:18–19, 21–24). Joseph Smith added 115.

What did Enoch do? He created this Zion community. What was Joseph Smith's goal from 1831 to 1838? To establish a similar city, a Zion community of the Saints. I think it really devastated him after 1838–39 when he and the Saints were expelled from Missouri. He must have thought, "What should I do? Is Zion forsaken? Are we going to still be able to go with that program?" He came to Nauvoo with an idea of eventually establishing and returning to Zion, returning to Missouri. But then he received section 124, in which the Lord said that Zion was on hold. He required the temple no more at their hands (see D&C 124:48–51). So they decided to build a temporary gathering place in Nauvoo and hope that in the future the establishment of Zion would take place. The word *Zion* is mentioned 210 times in the Doctrine and Covenants in 192 verses. Now, that means some of those verses have the word two or three times. It appears in fifty-seven sections of the Doctrine and Covenants. If we add the term *New Jerusalem*, that is seven more times. I think that was Joseph's focus and the Church's focus in 1838. He was trying to do what Enoch did—create a Zion society. In fact, Joseph even used *Enoch* as one of his code names. Joseph was fascinated with Enoch, who was able to do it. The Lord had revealed the principles on how to create Zion, so Joseph thought, "Maybe we can do it in my lifetime as well." I know that was his hope.

Holzappel: *Section 21 was received the day the Church was organized, "Yea, his weeping for Zion I have seen" (D&C 21:8). So already, by the time the Church is organized, Joseph Smith was obviously dreaming, praying, and weeping for this Zion.*

Bennett: The expulsion from Missouri and the travel to Quincy and then eventually to Nauvoo were not the end of Zion. In fact, it was a refinement of Zion. We may not have been able to stay in the place of Zion. Like you said about section 124, Nauvoo was going to be the cornerstone of Zion; they were going to reclaim Zion. They were still a Zion people on a Zion mission. I love section 124, verse 6: "For, behold, I am about to call upon them to give heed to the light and glory of Zion, for the set time has come to favor her." And even though they were driven out of that place of Zion, the Saints redeemed and reclaimed and rescued the concept of Zion. Section 124 is a reclamation of Zion. Even though Zion might not be this place, we are still Zion's people on a Zion mission. And it kind of goes with that foundation that you talked about, established there earlier. The Doctrine and Covenants never absolves us from that great hope of establishing Zion.

Baugh: Zion is still there in his mind when he writes the Wentworth letter in what is now Article of Faith 10: “We believe in the literal gathering of Israel, and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes; [in] Zion (the New Jerusalem).”

Hedges: You could say he replaces the focus on Zion with the focus on the temple, with Nauvoo, but the temple was all preparatory to, and feeding into, the idea of Zion. In section 105, when he calls off Zion’s Camp, he says, “It is expedient in me that mine elders should wait for a little season for the redemption of Zion—That they themselves may be prepared, and that my people may be taught more perfectly, and have experience. . . . And this cannot be brought to pass until mine elders are endowed with power from on high” (vv. 9–11). The whole focus on the temple, with the idea of Zion in mind, is preparatory. We are going to get people their endowments and become prepared to do what we were not able to do the first time.

Baugh: Absolutely. Joseph Smith clearly ties in the temple with becoming a Zion people. The centerpiece of Zion is the temple.

Bennett: Yes, it is the centerpiece when we look at the plat of the city of Zion.

Baugh: “Okay,” they probably thought, “if we cannot build a temple in Jackson County, we can build one in Kirtland. It is not *the* temple, but it will do what we need it to do in the meantime to prepare the Brethren—particularly, of course, for Zion.”

Holzappel: *Elder McConkie gave a conference address years ago in which he talked about the covenants we make, and one of them was that we would, basically, consecrate our time to build Zion [see “Obedience, Consecration, and Sacrifice,” Ensign, May 1975, 50]. And so whatever language of the Church, whether it be Tongan, or French, or an African dialect, or Spanish, or Portuguese, wherever Saints are to go to the temple, that word Zion is repeated as a covenant, a central covenant. It is always striking to me that, no matter where you live, that word becomes part of your vocabulary.*

Black: In fact, we use the phrase “the stakes of Zion.”

Baugh: I see the concept of Zion in several elements. Enoch’s city was Zion. We see the New Jerusalem, the holy city Joseph Smith hoped for and envisioned, as Zion. Joseph Smith definitely referred to the Church in Missouri during the Kirtland-Missouri period as the Church in Zion.

Black: And in Brigham Young’s time it was also a government. In the state of Deseret, Zion was a people, place, and government.

Baugh: And we often refer to the stakes of Zion, the whole element of the Church, as a Zion body. And then the scripture that we always refer to, section 97, verse 21, says that Zion is a condition. It is a pure-hearted people—people with pure motives, pure gospel intent. And so it is broad and yet it is narrow, but you look at the Book of Mormon and most of the verses or passages about Zion are Isaiah quotations. We get some in the Old Testament—again mainly Isaiah. Not a lot in the New Testament (seven verses total), but the Doctrine and Covenants is full of Joseph Smith’s vision of a utopian community of Saints.

Holzapfel: *I would like to add that the New Testament talks about building this type of kingdom. Jesus proclaims that the kingdom of God is at hand, and he prays, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth” (Matthew 6:10). Often Christians think about “going” to heaven. But Mormonism teaches the opposite, because of what Jesus said. “Thy kingdom come” suggests bringing heaven here on earth. Of course, the Pharisees had a countervision of the kingdom. They saw it in terms of a militant political action, thinking, “We are going to kick out the Romans,” but Jesus had a totally different view of how the kingdom was going to come.*

Bennett: The meek shall inherit the earth.

Holzapfel: *Instead of the meek going to heaven, the meek inherit the earth.*

Bennett: What stands out to me in the Doctrine and Covenants is the foundation of the first principles and ordinances of the gospel, the laying of the foundations for the concepts of Zion. Section 1 contains what I call the DNA of the Restoration. Some wonder why the account of the First Vision is not in the Doctrine and Covenants but in the Pearl of Great Price. Well, if you look carefully, the First Vision is in section 1. But it is the Lord’s perspective on the First Vision, not Joseph Smith’s. Verse 17 in section 1 says, “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.” This is not the calamity of the past apostasy but rather the calamity of the forthcoming apostasy. It is the message that the Lord is going to have to inoculate and prepare his people for that which is yet to come: the calamity of the loss of faith, the calamity of the loss of the sense of sin, the calamity of the loss of priesthood or regard for the priesthood.

Look carefully at these next few verses in this preface to the Doctrine and Covenants. Note carefully that they contain such phrases as “that every

man might speak in the name of God” (v. 20), which refers to a restoration of the priesthood, “that faith also might increase in the earth” (v. 21) in a time when faith declines. As a church, we are heading upstream, aren’t we? We are going against the current of a world declining in faith. “That mine Everlasting Covenant might be established” (v. 22). Here the Lord is speaking of the fulness of the gospel but also such specific and beautiful doctrines as eternal marriage and priesthood ordinances. Look at verse 27: “And inasmuch as they sinned they might be chastened, that they might repent.” And you go down through all these things, and I have counted, carefully counted these verses, there must be ten, twelve, fifteen reasons why the Lord called upon his servant, Joseph Smith, and laid the foundations of faith, repentance, baptism, and the Holy Ghost upon which the superstructure can be built.

As I have gone through and taught carefully the first half of the Doctrine and Covenants, it just keeps coming back: teach nothing but faith, repentance, baptism, and so forth. Parents in Zion, what are you to teach? Teach faith, repentance, baptism, and the Holy Ghost to your children or the sin will be upon you. And it lays this wonderful foundation. And then the second half of the Doctrine and Covenants really gets into temple work: sections 76, 110, 124, and 132.

The foundation needed to be put in place, and I love the way the Doctrine and Covenants opens up to it, right from the beginning of the First Vision. You know why the Lord called upon Joseph Smith? These are the reasons why. And then you build upon that. And as I have taught Doctrine and Covenants carefully, I see that foundation laid over and over again. Moroni taught Joseph these first principles because the message of the gospel had to be lived by the messenger of the gospel, and Joseph cannot teach that which he has not been taught. So you see great instruction about the first principles and ordinances



Photo by Richard B. Crookston

Richard Bennett points out how the first half of the Doctrine and Covenants keeps coming back to “teach nothing but faith, repentance, and baptism.”

in these early sections of the Doctrine and Covenants. This is how the foundation is laid.

Holzappel: *Richard Bushman and Terryl Givens have suggested the idea that once Joseph Smith had translated the Book of Mormon, he left it alone. It did not have an impact on the Restoration; people did not really read it. Based on Grant Underwood's studies of talks given by early Church leaders, the Saints were quoting more from the Bible than they were from the Book of Mormon. I am struck by two things. First, there is the account of Parley P. Pratt consuming the Book of Mormon. And second, Alexander Campbell read it and said the important thing about the Book of Mormon is that it answers many questions about faith and baptism. If a non-Mormon read it and understood it, why would you not suppose Joseph Smith and the early Saints understood it? Do you think the Book of Mormon was part of Joseph's training? In other words, did the Book of Mormon have a direct impact on what he thought about baptism, sacrament, and other principles?*

Bennett: How could the Book of Mormon not be instructive, when on the first week or two of translation, Joseph and Oliver started their Book of Mormon translation with the first four great sermons of the book of Mosiah? King Benjamin's address is the first sermon, which is all about believing in God, believing that he is, believing that he has all power to do all things in heaven and earth (see Mosiah 4:9) and about faith and service (see Mosiah 2–5). Abinadi's great sermon is the second sermon of the book of Mosiah: repent, repent, repent (see Mosiah 13–16). The third great sermon of the book of Mosiah is Alma speaking at the waters of baptism (see Mosiah 18). So the very translation of the Book of Mormon is instructive. It reveals principle after principle. The principle that takes Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery to the banks of the Susquehanna River is the Book of Mormon's teaching on baptism. To say that the Book of Mormon is not instructive to the Restoration is to misunderstand the Restoration. It was not anything else but the Book of Mormon that caused the restoration of baptism, the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood and later the Melchizedek Priesthood.

Black: To add to this point, the original members baptized into the Church typically had biblical names like John or Mary and English names like William or George. But children born to Latter-day Saints—the second-generation Latter-day Saints—had names like Joseph Mormon Harris. The early Saints often named their children after Book of Mormon prophets. It is hard to find a family of second-generation Saints that did not have a child with

a Book of Mormon name. It was not just Mahonri Moriancumer Calhoun. He was not the exception; he was the rule. So when people say, “Well, the Saints do not seem to have embraced the Book of Mormon like Parley P. Pratt did,” I question if they have done any family history work on the early Saints. The most popular name given a second-generation LDS child was Alma. The second most popular name was Moroni. I think it is a fallacy to say that just because scholars cannot find many Book of Mormon verses quoted by early Saints, the book did not permeate their personal lives.

Holzappel: *The idea that the first principles were being taught to the Prophet is accurate. Campbell got it right: the Book of Mormon answers the important questions about the gospel.*

Bennett: I do not think it is very productive to completely separate the Book of Mormon from the Bible. I think they are a continuum in one. We have already seen that the Book of Mormon had a great impact on the Restoration—the history and the theology. Well, so did the translation of the Bible, as Bob Matthews has clearly pointed out. The Bible is the launching platform for so many of the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants. Joseph was translating the Bible when section 76 came, when section 132 came, and when scores of other revelations came. The Bible gave birth to much of the Doctrine and Covenants, just as the Book of Mormon did. The argument about which book of scripture gave more is a little bit strained. They both come together to influence the Restoration. All scripture is made of the same fabric.

Holzappel: *Another problem with concluding that the Saints did not quote the Book of Mormon is that we have record of only about 10 percent of Joseph Smith’s discourses. And for most of these we have just a few lines, such as “preached on faith.” So to analyze these sermons when we have record of less than 10 percent may be misleading.*

Bennett: Remember that the very last scripture they studied in Carthage Jail, like Elder Jeffrey R. Holland pointed out, was not from the Bible; it was from the Book of Mormon (from the book of Ether). And they were willing to give their lives for that book—it was not a sort of sideline issue. As missionaries, they were teaching by the Book of Mormon, though perhaps they were more familiar with the Bible.

Holzappel: *It takes a generation to become familiar. Andy, what idea has come to you that you feel is significant?*



Photo by Richard B. Crookston

Andrew Hedges observes, “I am struck with the emphasis the Lord places on obtaining knowledge.”

Hedges: I am struck with the emphasis the Lord places on obtaining knowledge. Perhaps the best-known charge is in section 88, where he commands the Saints, “Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine” (v. 78). Then the Lord takes the lid off and says he wants us to study things in the earth and under the earth; things that were, are, and will be; things at home and abroad, and winds up by basically saying, “I want you to learn everything about everything, and it is a commandment so that you

can do a better job in fulfilling the missions that I have called you to do, and then you can be a good representative of me as you are out there preaching” (see v. 80).

The Lord reiterates this charge in section 90 when he says to the First Presidency in verse 15, “And set in order the churches, and study and learn, and become acquainted with all good books, and with languages, tongues, and people. And he continues in verse 16, “And this shall be your business and mission in all your lives, to preside in council,” and to preside in an informed way, in an intelligent way. And when Oliver Cowdery shows up on the scene, one of the first things the Lord tells him through Joseph is basically, “Start knocking and start asking, and I will give you information.” There are many other promises of knowledge throughout the Doctrine and Covenants. Section 42, verse 61 says, “If thou shalt ask”—again, you have to initiate it—“thou shalt receive revelation upon revelation, knowledge upon knowledge, that thou mayest know the mysteries and peaceable things—that which bringeth joy, that which bringeth life eternal.” Section 63, verse 23 says, “But unto him that keepeth my commandments I will give the mysteries of my kingdom, and the same shall be in him a well of living water, springing up unto everlasting life.” And section 93 concludes, “And, verily I say unto

you, that it is my will that you should hasten to translate my scriptures, and to obtain a knowledge of history, and of countries, and of kingdoms, of laws of God and man, and all this for the salvation of Zion” (v. 53).

To the Prophet in Liberty Jail, during the darkest hours of the Church, the Lord said, “God shall give unto you knowledge by his Holy Spirit, yea, by the unspeakable gift of the Holy Ghost, that has not been revealed since the world was until now” (D&C 121:26). And speaking of all that was to come forth, “How long can rolling waters remain impure? What power shall stay the heavens? As well might man stretch forth his puny arm to stop the Missouri river in its decreed course, or to turn it up stream, as to hinder the Almighty” from what? “From pouring down knowledge from heaven upon [his people]” (v. 33).

Baugh: Sections 130 and 131 teach that a man cannot be saved in ignorance. And Joseph is the prototype of one who really had that zest for spiritual and secular knowledge. I believe it was Joshua Seixas who said in the Hebrew school that Joseph was like a calf that sucked three cows. He just could not get enough. And of course, Joseph’s zest for learning languages included German and Hebrew.

Hedges: Well, and English, his efforts to improve his English grammar and expression.

Baugh: And in the Wentworth letter, he uses the term “summum bonum,” so he can also throw out some Latin. Joseph fully knew that he had the expectation to gain knowledge, spiritual and secular, as well as imparting that knowledge to the Saints.

Bennett: This idea is backed up in section 1: “And inasmuch as they erred it might be made known; and inasmuch as they sought wisdom they might be instructed” (vv. 25–26). So that it is part of this revelation of knowledge, both secular and spiritual; that is the foundation of the whole Restoration.

Baugh: The whole idea is to become informed, so that we can accomplish what we need to on this earth and later.

Bennett: And knowledge has the power not only to inform, but to reform. It can reform our character and refine our lives. It is that kind of saving knowledge that can bring us into the wholeness of Christ.

Holzapfel: *Now an idea you brought up: obedience. It is not just about seeking knowledge and getting a PhD. It is seeking knowledge and obeying once you learn the principles.*

Hedges: It includes but goes way beyond formal education.

Baugh: We have all read the *Times and Seasons*, *Messenger and Advocate*, *Elders' Journal*, and *Frontier Guardian*. Look what they include in their newspapers—not only all the spiritual kinds of things we would expect from a church publication but also what is happening in Europe, what is going in other countries.

Holzapfel: *It was an adult education par excellence. How many of them would have engaged in such studies if they had never become Mormons? Would they have continued to live out their lives as farmers or shopkeepers? The Saints were often tired, but they gathered to study by candlelight during the winter, trying to learn. It is amazing.*

Black: I have some strong feelings about the Word of Wisdom. Section 89 is sent by the Lord by way of greeting, not by commandment or constraint (see v. 2). Yet when today's missionaries are asked, "Why didn't that person get baptized?" they often reply, "He wants to be baptized, but he is not living the Word of Wisdom. He is a chain smoker."

The Word of Wisdom contains a suggested list of dos and don'ts. The revelation begins with the don'ts. As you look through the revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants, most focus on the dos, such as go on a journey, share the gospel, or build the Nauvoo Temple. These dos are specific and often time-sensitive.

The Word of Wisdom may also be time-sensitive for each individual. It is a guide to temporal health. When the individual focuses only on the don'ts, that individual will miss the important doctrine revealed in the rest of the section—the dos. The latter part of section 89 that I find most interesting is what comes at the end—the blessings. One might say, "I want to run and not be weary, walk and not faint. Can I receive these promised blessings if I live only half of the Word of Wisdom and only follow the don'ts? Can I have marrow in my bones? Can I have health in my navel? For me, the Word of Wisdom has had a huge impact in my life. It has helped me realize the importance of obedience in my daily habits. It has helped me realize the importance of knowing the entire revelation and that blessings or promises come at the end.

Holzapfel: *It really is an interesting revelation because of its history. Today, when we ask, "Do you live the Word of Wisdom?" we are generally talking about the proscriptions, those things that determine whether one can enter the temple. But this does not stop anyone from living the prescriptions that make you a healthier person. The Word of Wisdom is definitely unique. It lets people know*

who you are. Twenty-five years ago if you met somebody who said, “Sorry, I do not smoke” or “I do not drink,” you might privately ask, “Are you Mormon?” Today you cannot do that because there are lots of people who have discovered the great benefits of this healthy lifestyle. There are many non-Mormons who do not smoke or drink, and they might get a little offended if you ask, “Are you Mormon?”

Hedges: Conversations around the Word of Wisdom often tend to devolve into the little gray areas: what to do about chocolate or stimulating drinks from different cultures. One thing I have found helpful to teach my students is this: “The gray areas are there. The Word of Wisdom does not prescribe and proscribe every possible thing. It is not a list at all. But if you look at the blessings that Susan alluded to, look at what is at stake—health, wisdom, treasures of knowledge, and other promises. I tell my students, “If this is what is at stake, the question is not ‘What’s the bare minimum I can do and still get in the temple?’ The question is instead, ‘How can I more fully live this law to obtain the blessings for myself?’” I tell them, “If you’ll sincerely ask that question, all the little gray areas and the little arguments that often take over a Word of Wisdom discussion largely disappear.”

Black: So why do you think it is required that prospective members live the Word of Wisdom when it is our one revelation in the Doctrine and Covenants that is given by greeting?

Hedges: It is the minimum standard.

Black: But do you think what the Lord is really saying is, “If you can control temporal things, you can become an incredible servant in the house of the Lord?”

Hedges: I think the Word of Wisdom introduces that idea.

Baugh: If you cannot control the physical aspects of your life, how can you develop the spiritual character that God expects you to have? My dad always said that if you can control your appetite, you can control anything. Self-control really is a fundamental principle associated with the Word of Wisdom.

Bennett: I think, too, the Word of Wisdom is a wonderful fusion of spiritual and physical matters. And in the Church, we believe the body is a temple and we are to honor it. And a part of honoring that temple is keeping these commandments without becoming fanatical. For example, as the Lord told the Shakers, we are not commanded to be vegetarians (see D&C 49:18). We need not abstain from meat. We just need to be wise. I think the Word of Wisdom is an invitation to be wise.

Holzappel: *Years ago Susan compiled a list of titles for Christ in the Book of Mormon. After reading her research, now I tend to often look for such titles in the Old Testament and the Doctrine and Covenants. This always brings Christ back into the story. It is very clear. I have always appreciated Doctrine and Covenants section 45 in which the Lord says three or four different ways to hearken or listen to his voice. "Listen to him who is the advocate with the Father, who is pleading your cause before him—saying: Father, behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin, in whom thou wast well pleased; behold the blood of thy Son which was shed, the blood of him whom thou gavest that thyself might be glorified" (vv. 3–4).*

In John 14:16, Jesus says, "I will pray to the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter." It is interesting that the Greek word can also be translated as helper or advocate. Jesus is the Great Comforter. He is the Advocate. He is the Helper. He is the one who assists us, whether we are learning the first principles of the gospel, looking at this Word of Wisdom. Whether we are trying to build up Zion or seek education, the center of the story has always been, and always will be, Christ. In the Doctrine and Covenants, it is Jesus who speaks. Sometimes students will say, "How come the Doctrine and Covenants is a closed canon? Why do we not add revelations to it?" I remind them that actually every Doctrine and Covenants has 139 sections. I say, "Take your patriarchal blessing and put it at the end of your Doctrine and Covenants. That is your section, that is your revelation, given the same way the Doctrine and Covenants revelations were given. The patriarch hears the word of the Lord and speaks out loud so it can be recorded. The revelation is written, and copies are made. A copy went to Church archives. So how many revelations do we have? Tens of thousands of continuous written revelations. And it is the same person speaking in each revelation—we hear the voice of Jesus Christ.

Baugh: You hit the nail on the head, Richard. If people read the revelations and do not hear the voice of Christ, they have missed the major focus.

Hedges: The Lord himself says, "You are hearing my voice. This is my voice speaking to you. You can testify that you have heard my voice when you have read this revelation" (see D&C 18:35–36).

Baugh: There is no greater evidence of that than these revelations. When you hear Joseph Smith speak as a man, you know he is speaking as a man. When you hear his revelatory voice, the voice of Christ communicating through the Spirit, it is elevated. It is above and beyond what Joseph could produce as a normal human being, just like any of us.



Photo by Richard B. Crookston

BYU Religious Education faculty members discuss important topics in the Doctrine and Covenants. Pictured (left to right) are Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Andrew H. Hedges, Alexander L. Baugh, Susan Easton Black, and Richard E. Bennett.

Black: The scriptures are truly a road map. And I love the idea of adding your patriarchal blessing as part of that map.

Bennett: Section 1 says, “Hearken, O ye people of my church, saith the voice of him who dwells on high.” And it starts with Christ: “The voice of the Lord is unto all men” (vv. 1–2). So you have from the beginning to end a Christ-centered book.

Holzapfel: *The Doctrine and Covenants is an amazing book. This discussion has been very insightful. Thank you very much for joining me today.* **RE**