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"As Long as the World Shall Stand"
ELDER DAVID A. BEDNAR
Editor’s Note

Witnessing Small but Mighty Miracles of the Restoration

“W e are blessed to live and serve in a most remarkable season of the dispensation of the fulness of times,” Elder David A. Bednar teaches in his article “As Long as the World Shall Stand.” Comparing the power of temple covenants that fueled the Latter-day Saints during their exodus from Nauvoo with miracles associated with temples today, he witnesses, “No unhallowed hand and no pandemic can keep the Lord’s holy work from progressing.”

This issue of the Religious Educator explores some of the fruits of God’s holy work, especially as it centers on seminal events and cherished teachings of the Restoration. To coincide with study of the Doctrine and Covenants and Church history, scholars from across Church Education discuss doctrinal insights from Joseph Smith’s First Vision, Christ as the embodiment of law, and teachings about the book of Revelation found in Doctrine and Covenants 77. This issue also highlights using section 84 to understand the priesthood power of women and the voice of the Lord in Joseph Smith’s Liberty Jail letter. Additional authors include students of pilgrimage and religious tourism, a clinical psychologist, the retiring dean of Religious Education, and a former general officer of the Church. They show how to incorporate historic sites into our curriculum, assist anxious students struggling with scrupulosity, and guide learners to a correct understanding of the nature of God.

Our prayer echoes that of Elder Bednar. We hope the study of this content causes our “spiritual vision [to] be magnified and refined,” with the goal that we all better teach these concepts. As our understanding is expanded, we desire to “learn that the seemingly small miracles in [our lives] will be the mightiest and most impactful of all.”

Scott C. Esplin
Editor in Chief
Occasionally I am asked by Church members why we do not have mighty miracles today like those that occurred in the early days of the Restoration. My answer always is the same: “We do!”
“As Long as the World Shall Stand”

ELDER DAVID A. BEDNAR

Elder David A. Bednar, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, delivered this devotional address on January 19, 2021.

I am grateful to gather with you today in this Brigham Young University devotional. Susan and I love you and have looked forward to this occasion with great anticipation for many weeks.

I am pleased to bring to you the love and blessings of President Russell M. Nelson, President Dallin H. Oaks, President Henry B. Eyring, and all of my associates in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. We love and pray for you, and we appreciate your prayers for us.

I do not know the exact number of devotionals like this one that I attended during my years as a student on the BYU campus. But I do know and am grateful for the lasting impact that the messages I heard have had upon my life. I encourage you to take advantage of every opportunity to receive spiritual nourishment from the faithful men and women who are invited to speak in your campus devotionals.

I pray for the companionship, help, and edifying power of the Holy Ghost for all of us as I share my thoughts with you.
The Nauvoo Exodus

Today is January 19, 2021. Almost exactly 175 years ago, on February 4, 1846, Charles Shumway ferried across the Mississippi River and started the westward migration of Latter-day Saints from Nauvoo, Illinois. For three weeks in frigid temperatures, wagons ferried across the river, often steering clear of large ice chunks. After Charles C. Rich walked across the Mississippi on February 25, scores of additional refugees crossed the river on solid ice.1 The winter phase of this mass exodus was directed by President Brigham Young—the well-known Camp of Israel trek across Iowa involving approximately three thousand Saints.

The spring phase of the exodus included three large waves of refugees departing Nauvoo and involved more than ten thousand Saints—triple the number in the winter departure.

The fall phase of the exodus included about seven hundred Saints who were forced from Nauvoo at gunpoint.

The winter withdrawal from Nauvoo in particular caused unimaginable hardship for these faithful Latter-day Saints, and many sought shelter in camps along the Mississippi River. When word reached Brigham Young at Winter Quarters about the condition of these exiles, he immediately sent a letter across the river to Council Point encouraging the brethren to help—reminding them of the covenant made in the Nauvoo Temple. He counseled, “Now is the time for labor. Let the fire of the covenant which you made in the house of the Lord burn in your hearts, like flame unquenchable.”2 Within days, wagons were rolling eastward to rescue the struggling Saints.

What was it that gave those early Church members such strength? What fueled their devotion and enabled them to press forward in overwhelmingly adverse conditions? It was the fire of the temple covenants and ordinances that burned in their hearts. It was their commitment to “worship, and honorably hold a name and standing”3 in the house of the Lord. President M. Russell Ballard explained:

Sometimes we are tempted to let our lives be governed more by convenience than by covenant. It is not always convenient to live gospel standards and stand up for truth and testify of the Restoration. It usually is not convenient to share the gospel with others. It isn’t always convenient to respond to a calling in the Church, especially one that stretches our abilities. Opportunities to serve others in meaningful ways, as we have covenanted to do, rarely come at convenient times. But there is no spiritual power in living by convenience. The power comes as we keep our covenants. As we
look at the lives of these early Saints, we see that their covenants were the primary force in their lives.¹

In their extremity, these devoted disciples were keenly aware of their dependence upon God and trusted in Him for deliverance. And I believe they understood that sacred covenants and priesthood ordinances received worthily and remembered continually open the heavenly channels through which we have access to the power of godliness and all of the blessings made available through the Savior’s Atonement.

And this greater priesthood administereth the gospel and holdeth the key of the mysteries of the kingdom, even the key of the knowledge of God.
Therefore, in the ordinances thereof, the power of godliness is manifest.
And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh.²

Through their faithfulness, those stalwart Saints invited “the fire of the covenant” and “the power of godliness” into their lives. Strengthened and enabled by that fire and power, they were blessed to trek westward “with faith in every footstep.”³

Please note that the eternal importance of temple covenants and ordinances anchored both ends of the Latter-day Saint movement west.

In Nauvoo, Brigham Young labored diligently and encouraged the people to finish the temple. He personally worked night and day with members of the Twelve and other temple workers so that worthy Saints could receive their temple blessings in Nauvoo before beginning their westward journey.

President Young explained, “Such has been the anxiety manifested by the saints to receive the ordinances [of the Temple], and such the anxiety on our part to administer to them, that I have given myself up entirely to the work of the Lord in the Temple night and day, not taking more than four hours sleep, upon an average, per day, and going home but once a week.”⁴

And please remember that one of the first things President Young did upon entering the Salt Lake Valley was to select a site for another temple.

Early members like Sarah Rich were blessed to recognize and understand the supernal blessings available in the Lord’s holy house. She described her experiences in Iowa in 1846:

But many were the blessings we had received in the House of the Lord which has caused us joy and comfort in the midst of all our sorrows and enabled us to have faith in God knowing he would guide us and sustain us in the unknown journey that lay before us, for if it had not been for the faith and knowledge that was bestowed upon
us in that temple by the influence and help of the Spirit of the Lord our journey would have been like one taking a leap in the dark. To start out on such a journey in the winter as it were, and in our state of poverty it would seem like walking into the jaws of death but we had faith in our heavenly father and we put our trust in him feeling that we were his chosen people and had embraced his gospel and instead of sorrow we felt to rejoice that the day of our deliverance had come.  

My dear brothers and sisters, sacred covenants, priesthood ordinances, the fire of the covenant, and the power of godliness are central to understanding the breadth, depth, and reach of the migration of Latter-day Saints from Nauvoo to the Great Salt Lake Valley. And the lessons learned in Nauvoo and along the trails as the Saints traveled west continue to bless us to this very day.

**A Three-Day Warning**

To provide a frame of reference for what I am about to describe, I invite you to do your best to remember where you were and what you were doing between Tuesday, November 10, and Friday, November 13, 2020. Important episodes in Church history were occurring on those four days as the fire of the covenant and the power of godliness were evident in miraculous ways in several temples located in North America.

On November 10, 2020, government officials in a large jurisdiction announced that religious organizations should suspend all public gatherings and meetings. These restrictions were intended to help reduce the spread of COVID-19 and would be in effect for a minimum of three weeks—and likely longer. The announcement included a three-day warning that all operations should cease by midnight on Friday, November 13.

Because the temples had been closed for a period of time earlier in 2020, temple patrons, leaders, and workers were especially disappointed that ordinance work again would be halted. And given that only living ordinances were being performed by individual appointment and with reduced capacity resulting from physical distancing and other safety protocols, scores of members had been waiting patiently for their turn to enter the temple to make sacred covenants through priesthood ordinances. The new restrictions would cause Church members to face yet another heart-aching delay of uncertain duration.

Temple leaders and workers in one temple prayed earnestly for direction, counseled together, and sought inspiration from heaven. Answers came. The decision was made to keep the temple open around the clock on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday to accommodate as many patrons as possible. The doors
of the temple would remain open, and the lights would not be turned off until midnight on Friday, the 13th of November.

The tasks that needed to be completed seemed overwhelming. Some patrons would have to be contacted to confirm existing appointments. Other patrons with appointments scheduled after Friday the 13th would need to be informed about the temple closure and offered the opportunity to reschedule. Availability of temple workers would have to be evaluated so the extended hours of operation could be covered adequately. Crews to clean and sanitize the temple interior would need to be arranged. So many things to do and so little time to get them done!

The work began. Phone calls were made. Emails were sent. Text messages were delivered and answered. Volunteers were requested, and they responded by the dozens. The temple doors opened early Wednesday morning, and the lights were not turned off until midnight on Friday.

I now want to share with you quotes from eight individuals who were involved in these remarkable experiences. Please excuse the lengthy quotations, but only firsthand descriptions can do justice to the events that occurred.

Quote #1: “When I started calling patrons Tuesday afternoon, . . . I completely expected to leave messages. Almost everyone answered their phone. To me, [this was] a miracle. Almost all available time slots were filled in less than a day and a half.”

Quote #2: “Office clerks and secretaries spent countless hours calling patrons affected by the closure to see if they would like to reschedule their appointments. Every time I walked by their desks, they were on the phone. When they hung up, they would have smiles on their faces as they filled the schedule with new appointments for ordinances to be performed throughout the night. I have never seen such dedication as these sisters worked so hard to accommodate patrons in the work of the Lord.”

Quote #3: “In every aspect of this experience, the Lord’s hand was evident. There was miracle after miracle—miracles in scheduling, miracles in obtaining necessary paperwork to have ordinances completed, miracles in having one available appointment time precisely at the only time a patron was able to come. I am convinced that we are only aware of a small portion of that which the Lord did to allow His children the opportunity to receive temple blessings.”

Quote #4: “As I arrived at the temple on Thursday morning around 5:00 a.m., I saw ordinance workers who had served all night long still smiling as
they served. The most common theme that I heard from the workers was that this felt like Nauvoo when the Saints needed to leave but kept coming to the temple to receive their temple ordinances.

“And just like Nauvoo, I saw sacrifices made by people who love the Lord and who love the temple. One brother stayed at the temple day and night, not going home for three days. His service was invaluable and needed in so many ways. I saw sisters who serve in the office spend countless hours on the phone to reschedule the people desirous to receive their ordinances. I saw older adults walk the halls of the temple after receiving their endowment—with huge smiles on their faces. I saw the happy faces of couples sealed in the house of the Lord, grateful they didn’t need to wait for the temple to reopen. I saw missionaries come to the temple with their families, ready to be endowed with power from on high before embarking on their missions. I saw guests who had driven all night to attend the temple with their family. I witnessed a beautiful two-year-old girl surrounded by parents, grandparents, and other family members as they prepared to have her sealed to them for all eternity. I saw temple staff and ordinance workers spend countless hours sanitizing the temple, keeping everyone safe during the pandemic. There were ordinance workers who had served all morning who volunteered to come back and work all night. I will never forget the dedication and kindness shown this week in the Lord’s house.”

Quote #5: “What is inspiring to me are all the ordinance workers who came in droves at all hours of the day and night to make this happen, along with the engineers, assistant recorders, and especially the housecleaning crew (which I believe deserves the greatest praise. What a challenge they must have had!).”

Quote #6: “One sister, a convert of one year, received her endowment. She was so full of joy that the warmth and love she brought was felt by everyone. She was accompanied in the temple by her bishop, her Relief Society president, her stake president, a few other friends, and the two sister missionaries who taught her, both of whom had since been released from their missions. One of the very few ordinance workers serving in the temple for this session was someone close to this sister but who did not know of the appointment. When the sister receiving her endowment saw this ordinance worker, she said, ‘I prayed you would be here today.’”

Quote #7: “There are many challenges and experiences we face in life and sometimes wonder if we are or ever do ‘enough.’ Some of them are once
in a lifetime that we read about or hear that someone else has experienced. Serving in the temple during the middle of the night, as did the Nauvoo pioneers of old, was one of those treasured once-in-a-lifetime opportunities. Our entire shift was in awe of the light that shone in the eyes of the patrons that came and their gratitude, and were touched by the sacrifice and the privilege it was for us as workers to serve them in this way.”

**Quote #8:** “I have compared my feelings toward receiving my endowment to the early Saints who refused to just let the Nauvoo Temple close down before they fled west. They knew and understood the importance of the sacred ordinances that took place inside. I have felt how these pioneers felt. I knew that if I were a Saint then, I would have stood outside of the temple, waiting to make those eternal covenants. I understood how they felt. I understood the feeling of longing and urgency.

“I got to be one of those pioneers. I not only had the opportunity to make sacred covenants and receive sacred knowledge and blessings, but I got to be a part of history. I am extremely grateful for the Lord and the miracles and tender mercies He has blessed me with.”

**The Day of Miracles Has Not Ceased**

The prophet Mormon posed the following powerful questions:

Has the day of miracles ceased?

Or have angels ceased to appear unto the children of men? Or has he withheld the power of the Holy Ghost from them? Or will he, so long as time shall last, or the earth shall stand, or there shall be one man upon the face thereof to be saved?

Behold I say unto you, Nay; for it is by faith that miracles are wrought; and it is by faith that angels appear and minister unto men.

Occasionally I am asked by Church members why we do not have mighty miracles today like those that occurred in the early days of the Restoration. My answer always is the same: “We do!” The faith-filled events in Nauvoo in February 1846 and in North America in November 2020 are stunningly similar.

Perhaps such a mighty miracle occurred for the temple secretary and the Church member who were able to schedule an appointment—in an almost completely filled schedule—for the precise and only time that patron was able to come to the temple. The day of miracles has not ceased.
Perhaps such a mighty miracle occurred for the recent convert who was delighted to discover in her live endowment session an ordinance worker who was very close to her but who did not know about the appointment. “I prayed you would be here today.” The day of miracles has not ceased.

The mighty miracles in our lives are exactly the same today as they always have been for devoted disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ: making sacred covenants with God and receiving worthily priesthood ordinances, the fire of those holy covenants working on and within us, and receiving the power of godliness in our lives as we honor those covenants and “walk in all the ordinances of the Lord.”

The identical spirit that drew Latter-day Saints to the temple in Nauvoo clearly was at work in November of last year. And it is operating today and will continue into the future. The day of miracles has not ceased.

And I would exhort you, my beloved brethren, that ye remember that every good gift cometh of Christ.

And I would exhort you, my beloved brethren, that ye remember that he is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and that all these gifts of which I have spoken, which are spiritual, never will be done away, even as long as the world shall stand.

Promise and Testimony

We are blessed to live and serve in a most remarkable season of the dispensation of the fulness of times. With all the energy of my soul, I testify that no unhallowed hand and no pandemic can keep the Lord’s holy work from progressing. And I promise that as you honor your covenants and strive to discern “with an eye of faith,” your spiritual vision will be magnified and refined to help you learn that the seemingly small miracles in your life will be the mightiest and most impactful of all.

I joyfully witness the divinity and living reality of the Eternal Father and of His Only Begotten and Beloved Son, and I do so in the sacred name of the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

2. Brigham Young, letter to the high council at Council Point, Iowa, September 27, 1846, Brigham Young Office Files, General Correspondence, Outgoing,
1846–September–October, Church History Library, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=ecc4c37f-dc60-4b7a-b6a0-3b19c4abf8b3&crate=0&index=29.


7. Brigham Young, journal entry, January 12, 1846, as reported in History of the Church, 7:567; see Brigham Young Office Files, Journal, September 28, 1844–February 3, 1846, Church of History Library, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=de235849-df29-4851-b79d-ba78721d147d&crate=0&index=2; quoted in Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 299.


Joseph learned in the grove that God knows his children by name, one by one, for the first word spoken to the fourteen-year-old boy was his first name—"Joseph."
Doctrinal Insights from Joseph Smith’s First Vision

ROBERT L. MILLET

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From a presentation at the Church History Symposium on March 12, 2020.

The appearing of the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith is the foundation of this Church,” President David O. McKay stated. “Therein lies the secret of [the Church’s] strength and vitality. . . . What God is, is answered. His relation to his children is clear.” President Ezra Taft Benson pointed out, “Sometimes I think we are so close to [the First Vision] that we don’t fully appreciate its significance and importance and the magnitude of it.” President Benson then added, “The first vision of the Prophet Joseph Smith is bedrock theology in this Church.”

The purpose of this article is basically to ask ourselves, What difference does Joseph Smith’s First Vision make in terms of what members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe and teach? What foundational truths derive from Joseph’s experience in the Sacred Grove, as described in the contemporary accounts of that vision? While there are many truths and much significant doctrine that we learn through the First Vision, I limited this article to ten points.

1. A universal apostasy or falling away from the primitive gospel and teachings of Jesus Christ had taken place sometime following the deaths of the
Savior and his Apostles. The members of the Church of Jesus Christ in the first century were certainly cautioned of a coming apostasy and, in some cases, were even told that the apostasy was already underway. These warnings are found in the writings of Peter (see 2 Peter 2:1–3), Paul (see Acts 20:28–30; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–4; 1 Timothy 4:1–3; 2 Timothy 3:1–8), John (see 1 John 2:18–19; 4:1–2; 2 John 1:7), and Jude (see Jude 1:3–4, 10, 16–19). It is well known that Roman Catholics in the nineteenth century believed in an unbroken line of papal leadership from the Apostle Peter to the current pope. Although Protestants severed their ties to Catholicism through the years of Reformation, they still claimed the same link to first-century Christianity, as did the Catholics.

Many sensitive souls through the centuries following the crucifixion and death of the Savior concluded that all was not right in Christendom. Here are two examples. By the eighteenth century, less than a hundred years before the ministry of Joseph Smith, the prominent Reformed (Calvinist) evangelist Jonathan Edwards taught that “the apostles, in their days, foretold a grand apostasy of the Christian world, which should continue many ages, and observed that there appeared a disposition to such an apostasy, among professing Christians even at that day. And the greater part of the ages which have now elapsed, have been spent in the duration of that grand and general apostasy, under which the Christian world, as it has been called, has been transformed into that which has been vastly more deformed, more dishonorable and hateful to God.”

One of the principal religious figures of the early nineteenth century was Alexander Campbell, a contemporary of the Prophet Joseph Smith and the founder of what became the Disciples of Christ and Church of Christ movements. Campbell’s dissatisfaction with nominal Christianity is apparent in a statement from the first issue of a magazine he published called the Christian Baptist: “We are convinced, fully convinced, that the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint of modern fashionable Christianity.” Campbell additionally “condemned all beliefs and practices that could not be validated by apostolic mandates. He proclaimed that missionary societies, tract societies, Bible societies, synods, associations, and theological seminaries were inconsistent with pure religion.”

In Joseph Smith’s earliest (1832) account of the First Vision, he explained that “from the age of twelve years to fifteen I pondered many things in my heart concerning the situation of the world of mankind, the contentions and
divisions, the wickedness and abominations and the darkness which pervaded the minds of mankind. . . . By searching the scriptures, I found that mankind did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatized from the true and living faith, and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament. 7

In Orson Pratt’s account of the First Vision (1840), he wrote,

If [Joseph] went to the religious denominations to seek information, each one pointed to its particular tenets, saying—“This is the way, walk ye in it;” while, at the same time, the doctrines of each were, in many respects, in direct opposition to one another. It also occurred to his mind that God was not the author of but one doctrine, and therefore could not acknowledge but one denomination as his church, and that such denomination must be a people who believe and teach that one doctrine (whatever it may be) and build upon the same. He then reflected upon the immense number of doctrines now in the world, which had given rise to many hundreds of different denominations. 8

In the Church’s official account (1838), Joseph recorded that Christ declared the churches were “all wrong,” that the hearts of the professors (local ministers) were far from the Lord, that some of what they taught was man-made and not heaven-sent, and that while they had a form of godliness, “they
deny the power thereof” (Joseph Smith—History 1:19). In Orson Hyde’s (1842) account, we read that Joseph

discovered the world of religion working under a flood of errors, which, by virtue of their contradictory opinions and principles, laid the foundation for the rise of such different sects and denominations whose feelings toward each other all too often were poisoned by hate, contention, resentment, and anger. He felt that there was only one truth, and that those who understood it correctly all understood it in the same way. Nature had endowed him with a keen critical intellect, and so he looked through the lens of reason and common sense and with pity and contempt upon those systems of religion, which were so opposed to each other and yet were all obviously based on the scriptures.9

2. *The creeds of Christianity were unacceptable, even condemned, by the Lord.* The creeds of the Christian Church were those doctrinal formulations and theological pronouncements devised at various Christian church councils, intended to clarify what the correct interpretation of a given doctrine was and thus, at the same time, to identify heresy and heretical interpretations. The earliest of these was the Apostles’ Creed, dating to about AD 140. Creeds were formulated at Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451), and another was dubbed the Athanasian Creed (late 400s to early 500s). There followed many Protestant creeds, some of the more prominent being the Heidelberg Confession (1563), the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England (1563), and, within a hundred years, the Presbyterian Church’s Westminster Confession of Faith (1647).

Let’s examine portions of two of these creeds.

Nicaea (AD 325): “We believe in one God the Father all powerful, maker of all things both seen and unseen. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only begotten, begotten from the Father, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial [of one and the same substance, essence, or nature] with the Father.”

Chalcedon (451): Jesus is “truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [of the same substance or essence] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, . . . one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being
preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons.”

There is no question but that in the grove the Savior denounced religious creeds because of the doctrinal damage they had inflicted over the centuries. They fostered confusion on matters of doctrine, particularly the nature of the Godhead, such as humankind’s relationship to Deity.

There is, however, another problem with creeds—they tend to create distance between the children of God—to separate and divide people on the basis of belief; to draw strict lines in the sand between what is “orthodox” and what is “heresy”; to foster suspicion and even antagonism on the part of those who wear their beliefs like a badge of belonging. The Prophet Joseph Smith stated, “Mormonism is truth; and every man who [embraces] it for himself [is] at liberty to embrace every truth. . . . The first and fundamental principle of our holy religion is that we believe that we have a right 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, when that truth is clearly demonstrated to our minds.”

On another occasion he explained, “I cannot believe in any of the creeds of the different denominations, because they all have some things in them I cannot subscribe to, though all of them have some truth. I want to come up into the presence of God, and learn all things; but the creeds set up stakes, and say, ‘Hitherto shalt thou come, and no further’; which I cannot subscribe to.”

3. The Bible does not and cannot contain all of God’s word. To state that the Bible is the complete, sufficient, and final word of God (sola scriptura for the Protestants)—more specifically, the final written word of God—is to claim more for the Bible than it claims for itself. We are nowhere given to understand that after the ascension of Jesus and the ministry and writings of first-century Apostles that revelation from our Father in Heaven, which could eventually take the form of scripture and thus be added to the canon, would cease. Latter-day Saints would disagree, for example, with the following excerpt from the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, a declaration that reflects the concept of sola scriptura: “The New Testament canon is . . . now closed, inasmuch as no new apostolic witness to the historical Christ can now be borne. No new revelation (as distinct from Spirit-given understanding of existing revelation) will be given until Christ comes again.”

There comes to mind the words of the Lord through Nephi, son of Lehi, as he spoke so forcefully about the human inclination to receive additional
scripture: “Wherefore murmur ye, because that ye shall receive more of my word? . . . Because that I have spoken one word ye need not suppose that I cannot speak another; for my work is not yet finished; neither shall it be until the end of man, neither from that time henceforth and forever. Wherefore, because that ye have a Bible ye need not suppose that it contains all my words; neither need ye suppose that I have not caused more to be written” (2 Nephi 29:8–10; see also 28:27, 29–30).

The Prophet Joseph remarked,

From what we can draw from the Scriptures relative to the teaching of heaven, we are induced to think that much instruction has been given to man since the beginning which we do not possess now. . . . We have what we have, and the Bible contains what it does contain: but to say that God never said anything more to man than is there recorded, would be saying at once that we have at last received a revelation: for it must require one to advance thus far, because it is nowhere said in that volume by the mouth of God, that He would not, after giving what is there contained, speak again; and if any man has found out for a fact that the Bible contains all that God ever revealed to man he has ascertained it by an immediate revelation.¹³

Professor Lee M. McDonald, an evangelical Christian scholar, posed some fascinating questions relative to the present closed canon of Christian scripture. “The first question,” he wrote, “and the most important one, is whether the church was right in perceiving the need for a closed canon of scriptures.” McDonald also asked, “Did such a move toward a closed canon of scriptures ultimately (and unconsciously) limit the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the church? . . . On what biblical or historical grounds has the inspiration of God been limited to the written documents that the Church now calls its Bible?” Finally, McDonald inquires, “If the Spirit inspired only the written documents of the first century, does that mean that the same Spirit does not speak today in the church about matters that are of significant concern?”¹⁴

Latter-day Saints might, with propriety, ask, Who authorized the canon to be closed? Who decided that the Bible was and forevermore would be the final written word of God? Latter-day Saints teach the same basic message that Jesus and Peter and Paul and John delivered to the unbelieving Jews of their day—that the heavens had once again been opened, that new light and knowledge had burst upon the earth, and that God had chosen to reveal himself through the ministry of his Beloved Son and the Master’s ordained Apostles.
The fact of the matter is that no branch of Christianity limits itself entirely to the biblical text alone in making doctrinal decisions and in applying biblical principles. Roman Catholics turn to scripture, to creeds, to church tradition, and to the Magisterium (the teaching office of the Roman Catholic Church) for answers. Protestants, particularly evangelicals, turn to scripture, the Christian creeds, and to linguists and scripture scholars for their answers. Clearly, this is in violation of *sola scriptura*, the clarion call of the Reformation to rely solely upon scripture itself. In fact, there is no final authority on scriptural interpretation when differences arise, which of course they do.

A beloved friend and colleague, Professor Richard J. Mouw of Fuller Theological Seminary, himself a Reformed (Calvinist) scholar, wrote introspectively that “it has often struck me that [the Latter-day Saint] view of later scriptures [beyond the Bible] is much like my own view of the Calvinist creedal documents that I subscribe to. When I was a member of the Christian Reformed Church, I twice pledged my fidelity to a set of documents that were treated in that denomination as guidelines for understanding the biblical message from the standpoint of Reformed orthodoxy. In doing so, I promised . . . to uphold the truth of, along with the classical Christian creeds, three Reformation-era documents.” Mouw went on to say that “it’s not enough to criticize [Latter-day Saints] for treating with great seriousness things that they’ve added on to the biblical message. We all do that kind of thing.”

The Bible is a magnificent tool in the hands of God, but it is too often used as a club or a weapon in the hands of men and women. For a long time now, the Bible has been used to settle disputes of every imaginable kind, even those the prophets never intended to settle. Creeds and biblical interpretations in the nineteenth century served as much to distinguish and divide as they did to inform and unite. Richard Bushman has offered the following assessment of what Joseph Smith faced and what he did: “At some level, Joseph’s revelations indicate a loss of trust in the Christian ministry. For all their learning and their eloquence, the clergy could not be trusted with the Bible. They did not understand what the book meant. *It was a record of revelations, and the ministry had turned it into a handbook. The Bible had become a text to be interpreted rather than an experience to be lived. In the process, the power of the book was lost.*”

4. *Satan is neither myth nor metaphor, but is an actual being who seeks tirelessly to thwart the plan of the Father and thus block the progress of God’s children.* Young Joseph learned firsthand that the evil one is “an actual being from the
unseen world” who possessed great power (see Joseph Smith—History 1:16). Alexander Neibaur, a Jewish convert to the Church from England, heard Joseph Smith relate his experience not long before the martyrdom (1844). In Neibaur’s account we read that Joseph “opened the Bible, and the first passage that struck him was ‘If any man lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not.’ He went into the woods to pray and knelt himself down. His tongue was cleaved to the roof [of his mouth]; he could not utter a word. He felt easier after a while.”

Orson Hyde’s 1842 account is in many ways the most distinctive: “On one occasion, he went to a small grove of trees near his father’s home and knelt down before God in solemn prayer. The adversary then made several strenuous efforts to cool his ardent soul. He filled his mind with doubts and brought to mind all manner of inappropriate images to prevent him from obtaining the object of his endeavors. But the overflowing mercy of God came to buoy him up and gave new impetus to his failing strength.”

One wonders whether Joseph may have reflected upon his own encounter with Satan when he translated the following from the golden plates: “For behold, at that day shall [the devil] rage in the hearts of the children of men, and stir them up to anger against that which is good. And others will he pacify, and lull them away into carnal security, that they will say, All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth. . . . And behold, others he flattereth away, and telleth them there is no hell; and he saith unto them: I am no devil, for there is none—and thus he whispereth in their ears, until he grasps them with his awful chains, from whence there is no deliverance” (2 Nephi 28:20–22; emphasis added).

We live in a world today in which large numbers of people deny outright the existence of Satan. From an April 2009 report of the Barna Research Group, “Four out of ten Christians (40%) strongly agreed that Satan ‘is not a living being but is a symbol of evil.’” The Catholic World Report of September 2017 states, “New research data . . . reveals that Catholics are among the least likely to agree that Satan is a ‘living being.’ . . . Only 17% of all Catholics polled indicated that they viewed Satan as a living presence in the world. Rather, Catholics are more likely to view Satan as a symbol of evil rather than a ‘real’ living being.”

5. Salvation is in Christ. Before the boy Prophet in the Sacred Grove stood Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, in company with his Eternal
Father. The testimony of the New Testament writers was that Jesus did in very deed rise from Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb. That is, his eternal spirit was reunited with his glorified and exalted body to stand evermore as the pre-eminent testimony that life continues after death; that the Resurrection is an actual, real, and inseparable union of the body and the spirit. No doubt millions of Christians around the world in 1820 believed in the reality of the immortality of the soul, as manifest in the resurrection of Christ. Joseph’s was an additional and modern-day witness of the same supreme truth. The mature Prophet could later add his conviction to that of the prophets who had preceded him: “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!” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:23).

The First Vision testifies that salvation is in Christ. Forgiveness of sin comes only through him. In an address to students at Utah State University in 1971, President Harold B. Lee remarked, “Fifty years ago or more, when I was a missionary, our greatest responsibility was to defend the great truth that the Prophet Joseph Smith was divinely called and inspired and that the Book of Mormon was indeed the word of God. But even at that time there were the unmistakable evidences that there was coming into the religious world actually a question about the Bible and about the divine calling of the Master, Himself. Now, fifty years later, our greatest responsibility and anxiety is to defend the divine mission of our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, for all about us, even among those who claim to be professors of the Christian faith, [we find many who] are not willing to stand squarely in defense of the great truth that our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, was indeed the Son of God.”

How much more do people of our day—more than a half century after President Lee’s message, a time when religion and religious discourse are being pushed to the margins of society—stand in need of a prophetic witness of the divine sonship of Christ? Consequently, it is deeply significant that the earliest accounts of the Prophet Joseph’s theophany are grounded in the testimony of Jesus. From the earliest (1832) account: “I was filled with the Spirit of God, and the Lord opened the heavens upon me. And I saw the Lord, and he spake unto me, saying, ‘Joseph, my son, thy sins are forgiven thee. Go thy way, walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments. Behold, I am the Lord of glory. I was crucified for the world, that all those who believe on my name may have eternal life.” In the 1835 account of the First Vision, we read that “a personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of flame, which was spread all
around and yet nothing consumed. Another personage soon appeared like unto the first. He said unto me, ‘Thy sins are forgiven thee.’ He testified also unto me that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”

6. God the Father has form, shape, and human identity. Most all Christians in the Prophet’s day believed that God the Father is a spirit, often citing or quoting John 4:24 (“God is a spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth”). Few persons of that day would have spoken of God as a man, and even fewer would do so today. Here is an excerpt from the 39 Articles of Religion of the Church of England (1563): “There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the Maker, and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there be three Persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost” (emphasis added).

The fourteen-year-old seeker “learned for himself” that God our Heavenly Father is a man—a he, a person, a personage—and that we are created in his image. We might ask, “Did the young Prophet learn in his First Vision that God the Father has a physical, corporeal body?” He certainly may have done so, but Joseph did not mention this specific detail in any of the contemporary accounts that we now have.

On the one hand, it may be that Joseph Smith simply did not understand the physical nature of God the Father as a result of the First Vision. His knowledge of the Almighty—like that of all mortals—was acquired incrementally, and his development in doctrinal understanding was thereby accomplished precept upon precept. Joseph would certainly not know and understand in 1820 what he would by the time of his death in 1844. The earliest reference in a sermon by Joseph on the corporeality of God, now in our possession, seems to be January 5, 1841. On that occasion William Clayton recorded the Prophet as saying, “That which is without body or parts is nothing. There is no other God in heaven but that God who has flesh and bones.”

Six weeks later, “Joseph said concerning the Godhead [that] it was not as many imagined—three heads and but one body; he said the three were separate bodies.” On March 9, 1841, he declared that “the Son had a tabernacle and so had the Father.” Finally, it was on April 2, 1843, in Ramus, Illinois, that Brother Joseph delivered instructions on the matter that are the basis for Doctrine and Covenants 130:22–23: “The Father has a body of flesh and
bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost... is a personage of Spirit.”

The other possibility, of course, is that Joseph Smith did in fact know of God’s corporeality much earlier than we have supposed. It’s fascinating to consider that while involved in his inspired translation of Genesis (November–December 1830), Joseph dictated the following, which is now part of the Book of Moses: “And this was the book of the generations of Adam, saying: In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him; in the image of his own body, male and female created he them” (Moses 6:8–9; JST, Genesis 6:9; emphasis added).

The late professor Milton V. Backman brought to light a description of the beliefs of the Latter-day Saints by a Protestant clergyman in Ohio—Truman Coe, a Presbyterian minister who had for four years lived among the Saints in Kirtland. Coe published the following regarding the beliefs of the Latter-day Saints in the August 11, 1836, Ohio Observer: “They contend that the God worshipped by the Presbyterians and all other sectarians is no better than a wooden god. They believe that the true God is a material being, composed of body and parts; and that when the Creator formed Adam in his own image, he made him about the size and shape of God himself.”

If a minister of another faith had declared as early as 1836 that the Latter-day Saints were teaching that God has a body, it is not inconceivable that such things were known by Joseph early on, perhaps even from the time of the Sacred Grove.

Church leaders in the twentieth century certainly taught that in the grove Joseph learned that God has a physical body. At the time of the centennial celebration of the First Vision, the April 1920 Improvement Era contained messages from several Church leaders about the importance of that vision to the Saints and to the world. Note the following from President Charles W. Penrose, second counselor in the First Presidency: “Never before, so far as history has recorded, was Deity this fully manifested. The Father and the Son as distinct and separate personalities, spiritual, but tangible beings in human form, the Holy Spirit emanating from them as light and life and witness of their divinity to the soul of the inspired youth seeking after God! No mere immaterial, bodiless, incomprehensible abstractions were they or either of them, but real, actual beings, with form and feature and individuality, the Father, and his Son each in the majesty and unity of exalted, perfected, and glorified humanity. The great truth was made plain that God did literally make man ‘in his own likeness’ and that Christ Jesus was ‘the express image of his person.’”
Similarly, Elder Joseph Fielding Smith observed that “When Joseph Smith went in the woods to pray, just one hundred years ago, he received a revelation of knowledge, truth and power, which has been of inestimable value and blessing to the world. What was revealed to him there was given for the overthrow of false creeds and traditions of the ages and led ultimately to the restoration of the everlasting gospel as revealed by our Redeemer during his ministry. . . . The vision of Joseph Smith made it clear that the Father and the Son are separate personages, having bodies as tangible as the body of man. . . . This all-important truth staggered the world.”

7. The Father and the Son are separate and distinct persons, distinct beings, distinct Gods. Let’s look carefully at an excerpt from the Athanasian Creed (late 400s to early 500s):

What quality the Father has, the Son has, and the Holy Spirit has. The Father is uncreated, the Son is uncreated, the Holy Spirit is uncreated. The Father is immeasurable, the Son is immeasurable, the Holy Spirit is immeasurable. The Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, the Holy Spirit is eternal. And yet there are not three eternal beings; there is but one eternal being. So too there are not three uncreated or immeasurable beings; there is but one uncreated and immeasurable being. Similarly, the Father is almighty, the Son is almighty, the Holy Spirit is almighty. Yet there are not three almighty beings; there is but one almighty being.

The large majority of Christians in the nineteenth century would have been brought up on the concept of the “ontological oneness” of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—that they are three separate persons but one being. This is an integral part of the doctrine of the Trinity, as accepted by hundreds of millions of Christians throughout the world today. To suggest to a minister or priest—then or now—that God our Heavenly Father “has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s” (Doctrine and Covenants 130:22) and that the Father and the Son are separate beings and separate Gods would invite argument, ridicule, and even cries of heresy and blasphemy.

The wedge that was driven between traditional Christianity and Latter-day Saint Christianity dates to the spring of 1820. “The First Vision was a challenge to the religious vagaries of the day,” Elder John A. Widtsoe wrote. “It shattered many a false doctrine taught throughout the centuries. Yet it was plain and simple to the human understanding. There was no mysticism about it. . . . Further, the vision challenges the contradictory and confusing conceptions of the nature of God. For centuries men had thought, talked, and philosophized about the nature of God, not only his powers but the essence
of him, without reaching an agreement. . . . The result was unutterable confusion to the rational mind.”

In offering a Latter-day Saint response to the doctrine of the Trinity, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught, “We believe these three divine persons constituting a single Godhead are united in purpose, in manner, in testimony, in mission. We believe Them to be filled with the same godly sense of mercy and love, justice and grace, patience, forgiveness, and redemption. I think it is accurate to say we believe They are one in every significant and eternal aspect except believing Them to be three persons combined in one substance, a Trinitarian notion not set forth in the scriptures because it is not true.”

It is not unimportant that only eleven days before his death, the Prophet Joseph stated that “I have always declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and that the Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and a spirit: and these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods.”

8. The Lord would soon begin a grand Restoration, and young Joseph would be the instrument through whom God would initiate this “restitution of all things” foreseen by the ancients (Acts 3:21). This would be a new gospel dispensation in which, as the Apostle Paul wrote, God would “gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth, even in him” (Ephesians 1:10). From the Wentworth Letter (1842): “They [the first two members of the Godhead] told me that all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines, and that none of them was acknowledged of God as his church and kingdom. And I was expressly commanded to ‘go not after them,’ at the same time receiving a promise that the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known unto me.”

The Restoration would entail the return of spiritual gifts, including new visions, new doctrinal truths, new conferrals of priesthood authority. In referring to one of the great blessings of the Restoration, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are often heard to say that “the heavens are no longer sealed.” Let’s be clear on this matter. The Saints are aware that men and women of other faiths, noble and God-fearing persons throughout the earth, seek to know the will of the Almighty so that they can carry it out. They strive to be guided and led by his Holy Spirit, and to the extent that they are true to the light they possess, they do in fact receive the Lord’s divine guidance. God loves all of his children and “is no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34). In saying that “the heavens are no longer sealed,” Latter-day Saints
mean that *institutional revelation*, revelation needed to guide the Church of Jesus Christ through apostles and prophets, has been restored. That is, revelation comes once again to and through his ordained apostles, the foundation of the Savior’s Church (see Ephesians 2:19–20).

In addition, by and through the power of the Holy Ghost—which gift comes only through the laying on of hands of those holding the Melchizedek Priesthood—members of the restored Church may and should seek for and obtain individual inspiration, personal revelation for their lives and those under their care or direction. In the words of the choice Seer, “We believe that we have a right to revelations, visions, and dreams from God, our Heavenly Father; and light and intelligence, through the gift of the Holy Ghost, in the name of Jesus Christ, on all subjects pertaining to our spiritual welfare; if it so be that we keep the commandments, so as to render ourselves worthy in his sight.”

President Russell M. Nelson, a twenty-first century prophet and rightful successor to Joseph Smith, offered both a prophetic word and significant counsel: “Our Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, will perform some of His mightiest works between now and when He comes again. “We will see miraculous indications that God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, preside over this Church in majesty and glory. But in coming days, it will not be possible to survive spiritually without the guiding, directing, comforting, and constant influence of the Holy Ghost. My beloved brothers and sisters, I plead with you to increase your spiritual capacity to receive revelation.”

9. *Joseph Smith encountered and became acquainted with a God who is personal, approachable, and knowable.* Twentieth century Christian theologian Emil Brunner voiced what would have been repeated and believed many, many times in the early nineteenth century. He wrote of the great divide between God and humankind: “There is no greater sense of distance than that which lies in the words Creator-Creation. Now this is the first and fundamental thing which can be said about man: He is a creature, and as such he is separated by an abyss from the Divine manner of being. The greatest dissimilarity between two things which we can express at all—more dissimilar than light and darkness, death and life, good and evil—is that between the Creator and that which is created.”

It is only natural for those who believe that God and humanity are basically of a different race, a different species, to also believe that God is *impassible*, meaning incapable of emotions or feeling pain. Another related
teaching that arose in the early Christian centuries that broadened and deepened the God-man chasm was the doctrine of human depravity. That distance between sinless Deity and sinful and depraved humanity certainly persisted, and perhaps even expanded, by Joseph Smith’s day. Thankfully, Joseph Smith was charged to restore a correct knowledge of God and humanity.

Joseph learned in the grove that God knows his children by name, one by one, for the first word spoken to the fourteen-year-old boy was his first name—“Joseph.” Some three thousand years before Christ, the prophet Enoch beheld with surprise that God wept for his wandering children. “How is it thou canst weep,” Enoch asked, “seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity?” Still, Enoch humbly acknowledged, “thou art there, and thy bosom is there; and also thou art just; thou art merciful and kind forever” (Moses 7:29–30). The scriptures of the Restoration attest that God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ are in the business of people, as Moses learned on an unnamed mountain: “For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). Another way of saying this is to state that God’s infinity does not preclude his immediacy or his intimacy.

“God not only numbers the stars and knows their names,” Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught, “but, more importantly, He knows us and our names, and He can heal our hearts and treat our wounds. Though wide-eyed with wonder, we, being His spirit children, are not aliens in His universe.” President Dieter F. Uchtdorf uttered a profound truth when he taught, “While we may look at the vast expanse of the universe and say, ‘What is man in comparison to the glory of creation?’ God Himself said we are the reason He created the universe! . . . This is a paradox of man: compared to God, man is nothing; yet we are everything to God.”

10. Joseph Smith’s quest for the truth, including the salvation of his own soul, provides a pattern for how to approach God and receive answers. Let’s take a moment and reflect on how young Joseph Smith was able to penetrate the veil and behold the first two members of the Godhead. First, he searched the scriptures. In an interview, William Smith, younger brother of the Prophet, stated that Reverend George Lane preached a sermon on “which church should I join” and focused on James 1:5. Deeply moved by what he heard, Joseph returned home and searched the Bible to find that particular passage.41

There is no more moving and descriptive statement regarding the power of pondering as that contained in the Prophet’s own words: “Never did any
passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did, for how to act I did not know, and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had, I would never know” (Joseph Smith—History 1:12). The message of James 1:5 “was cheering information to [Joseph],” Elder Orson Pratt concluded, “tidings that gave him great joy. It was like a light shining forth in a dark place, to guide him to the path in which he should walk.”

Notice that Joseph reflected on the scriptural words again and again; he had confidence in the word of God, and so this was no superficial inquiry. Young Joseph took an idea, an expression written sometime around AD 50 and “likened it” to himself; he appropriately wrenched James’s words from their original New Testament context, sensing that they had specific reference, relevance, and application to a farm boy in 1820 in upstate New York.

Most important, Joseph went to God in prayer. “I immediately went out into the woods where my father had a clearing, and went to the stump where I had struck my axe when I had quit work, and I kneeled down, and prayed, saying, ‘O Lord, what Church shall I join.’ Directly I saw a light, and then a glorious personage in the light, and then another personage, and the first personage said [of the second, ‘Behold my beloved Son, hear him.’”

President Nelson posed a simple but deeply significant question to the Latter-day Saints:

How can we become the men and women—the Christlike servants—the Lord needs us to be? How can we find answers to questions that perplex us? If Joseph Smith’s transcendent experience in the Sacred Grove teaches us anything, it is that the heavens are open and that God speaks to His children.

The Prophet Joseph Smith set a pattern for us to follow in resolving our questions. Drawn to the promise of James that if we lack wisdom we may ask of God, the boy Joseph took his question directly to Heavenly Father. He sought personal revelation, and his seeking opened this last dispensation.

In like manner, what will your seeking open for you? What wisdom do you lack? What do you feel an urgent need to know or understand? Follow the example of the Prophet Joseph. Find a quiet place where you can regularly go. Humble yourself before God. Pour out your heart to your Heavenly Father. Turn to Him for answers and for comfort.
One brief comment made by the Prophet Joseph as a part of his 1838 account speaks volumes. “He [Jesus Christ] again forbade me to join with any of them.” Now, note what follows: “And many other things did he say unto me, which I cannot write at this time” (Joseph Smith—History 1:20). How expansive is that remark! We do not know how long Joseph Smith was caught up into vision with God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son. Was it moments? Did it take hours?

However long the duration of the transcendent experience was, we can rest assured that enough was said and heard to prepare young Joseph Smith for the monumental task that lay before him. Further, we can be certain, as Orson Pratt stated, that God “revealed as much as Joseph was capacitated to receive. The Lord dealt with this young man as parents do when they wish to instruct their children on any subject. Wise parents do not pour out volumes of instruction on the children all at once, but rather they impart to them according to their capacity.” The Lord “imparted enough to let him know that the whole Christian world was without authority.”

Speaking at the Carthage Jail on the 150th anniversary of the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, President Howard W. Hunter declared, “Joseph Smith’s greatness consists of one thing—the truthfulness of his declaration that he saw the Father and the Son and that he responded to the reality of that divine revelation.” President Gordon B. Hinckley observed that Joseph Smith’s First Vision “is the pivotal thing in our story. Every claim that we make concerning divine authority, every truth that we offer concerning the validity of this work, all finds its root in the First Vision of the boy prophet. Without it we would not have anything much to say. This was the great curtain-raiser on the dispensation of the fullness of times, when God promised he would restore all the power, the gifts, the blessings, of all great dispensations in one great summing up.”

Some years ago, my colleague Joseph Fielding McConkie wrote, “Had Joseph Smith sought answers in the Bible, instead of on his knees in a quiet grove, we would still be waiting for the restoration of the gospel promised in the Bible. . . . Our responsibility is to teach investigators to pray and to show them how answers come. The well-trained missionary,” and that certainly includes member missionaries, “will answer investigators’ questions by finding the simplest and most direct route to the Sacred Grove.”
A humorous but instructive account of an experience of Elder Matthew Cowley illustrates the spiritual power that accompanies an earnest expression of belief in and loyalty toward the Restoration, which of course began with the First Vision. “I was called on a mission,” Elder Cowley begins. “And I will never forget the prayers of my father the day that I left. I have never heard a more beautiful blessing in all my life. Then his last words to me at the railroad station, ‘My boy, you will go out on that mission; you will study; you will try to prepare your sermons; and sometimes when you are called upon, you will think you are wonderfully prepared, but when you stand up, your mind will go completely blank.’ I have had that experience more than once.” Elder Cowley then asked his father what he should do in such instances.

His father replied, “You stand up there and with all the fervor of your soul, you bear witness that Joseph Smith was a prophet of the living God, and thoughts will flood into your mind and words to your mouth, to round out those thoughts in a facility of expression that will carry conviction to the heart of everyone who listens.” And so my mind, being mostly blank during my five years in the mission field, gave me the opportunity to bear testimony to the [First Vision]. Try it some time. . . . If you don’t have anything else to say, testify that Joseph Smith was the prophet of God, and the whole history of the Church will flood into your mind . . . if you will but bear testimony that the prophet was indeed a servant of God and an instrument in his hands.”

President Benson put things into perspective. He testified that when the Father and the Son “appeared to the boy prophet, Joseph Smith, it is not something that concerns only a handful of people. It is a message and a revelation intended for all of our Father’s children living upon the face of the earth. It is the greatest event that ever happened in this world since the resurrection of the Master.”

Notes
1. Teachings of Presidents of the Church: David O. McKay (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003), 93.
2. Ezra Taft Benson, God, Family, Country: Our Three Great Loyalties (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 57; emphasis added.
3. The contemporary accounts drawn upon in this article are (1) Joseph Smith’s 1832 account, a part of his earliest history; (2) the Prophet’s 1835 account, part of a report of a conversation Joseph had with a man by the name of Robert Matthias (or Matthews); (3) the official, canonized account (1838) found in Joseph Smith—History 1:5–20; (4) Orson Pratt’s 1840 account, the first published account, in Scotland; (5) the Wentworth
Letter (1842), written by Joseph to John Wentworth, editor of the *Chicago Democrat*; (6) Orson Hyde’s 1842 account, a part of a pamphlet written while Elder Hyde was laboring in Germany; (7) an 1843 account of an interview of the Prophet by David Nye White, editor of the *Pittsburg Weekly Gazette*; and (8) an 1844 account by Alexander Neibaur, a Jewish convert from England who heard Joseph relate the story of his vision. I have taken the liberty to correct punctuation and spelling within the accounts. These accounts may be found in the “Gospel Topics” essays, as well as Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 31–66; also Robert L. Millet, *I Saw a Pillar of Light: Sacred, Saving Truths from Joseph Smith’s First Vision* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2020), 129–39.


8. In the Wentworth Letter (the 1842 account), Joseph explained that if he “went to one society, they referred me to one plan, and another to another; each one pointing to his own particular creed as the *summum bonum* of perfection. Considering that . . . God could not be the author of such confusion, I determined to investigate the subject more fully.”


13. Letter to the Church, ca. March 1834.


17. Journal of Alexander Neibaur, May 24, 1844, Church History Library.


24. The actual translation from the Greek is “God is spirit. . . .” The Joseph Smith Translation of that verse is “For unto such God hath promised his Spirit. And they who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth” (JST, John 4:26).
27. Ehat and Cook, Words of Joseph Smith, 64.
32. There were, of course, exceptions to this statement. David Millard, a minister who organized an Eastern Christian Church, published a pamphlet in 1818 in which he attacked the prevailing view of the Trinity. He undertook a scriptural analysis of the New Testament to prove his point. “The whole tenor of scripture,” he asserted, concurs in the testimony, that Christ is verily the Son of God, as really so as Isaac is the son of Abram.” He further stressed the illogical nature of the Nicaean concept: “Three Gods are not one God, any more than three times one is one or two and one are one: which not only destroys the rules of multiplication and addition, but is flat inconsistency.” The True Messiah Exalted, or Jesus Christ Really the Son of God, Vindicated, in Three Letters to a Presbyterian Minister (Canandaigua, 1818), 5–8. William Ellery Channing, the father of Unitarianism, stated in a famous 1819 Baltimore sermon that God can no more be three persons than man can be. The Works of William E. Channing (Boston, 1886), 371; cited in Milton V. Backman Jr., American Religions and the Rise of Mormonism (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 210.
35. Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 41–42.
37. Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith, 132.
44. “Interview, 21 August 1843, extract,” The Joseph Smith Papers.
45. “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” Ensign, May 2018; emphasis added.
49. Joseph Fielding Smith, Here We Stand (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 194–95; emphasis added.
50. Matthew Cowley, “Put Your Hand into the Hand of God” (BYU devotional address, October 20, 1953); emphasis added; see also Matthew Cowley Speaks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), 297–98.
The law we follow is not simply a set of principles, stipulations, and commandments (though these play a crucial role) but rather a life of worship founded on obedience to Christ himself, who embodies the law.
Christ as Our Law: He Who Sanctifies, Enlightens, and Saves

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The doctrine of Christ is a living, practical theology of discipleship (see 2 Nephi 31:21, Doctrine and Covenants 10:62). With the revelations given to Joseph Smith, particularly those in the Doctrine and Covenants, the faith of the Latter-day Saints is grounded in the realm of practical behavior—of religious life ordered for individuals and the Church by laws, principles, and, above all, covenants and ordinances given us by Deity. But all these point to Christ himself as the law. Clearly there are elements of correct belief or orthodoxy, but these are primarily useful because they point us to faith in Christ and establish how we come to him through covenants and ordinances. Indeed, the gospel law that we follow is more than a mere program for personal improvement or a set of moral imperatives; it is something that establishes us and keeps us in a living relation with a living being—our Lord Jesus Christ—who, if we will let him, will be the law that can govern, preserve, perfect, and sanctify us.

With respect to Christ being the law, I mean that he is ultimately the person we follow and submit to. The law we follow, the truth we come to know, the light and life we experience—all of this is fundamentally Christ
himself.’ This is perhaps best illustrated in the understanding Elder Bruce D. Porter came to when, as a university student, he spent several hours one evening studying carefully and prayerfully the doctrine of Christ. In the process of this, he was overcome with the reality of Christ being the center of all: “I received a pure witness by the power of the Holy Ghost that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world, a living being, my friend and support in every time of need. Until that day, my faith had been centered in a set of principles and doctrines. From that day on, my faith centered in a living being. That testimony has been the guiding star of my life.”

Obeying Christ Glorifies Us

This view of Christ as the law helps us understand sections 76 and 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants with respect to the degrees of glory and the conditions attending those glories, including those who have no glory. Significantly, the law of the celestial kingdom is said to be the law of Christ, with varying degrees of that law or light of Christ being present in each of the other kingdoms of glory.

Section 88 explains that one inherits a kingdom of glory according to the law one is willing to abide by. If one will abide the law of Christ—the law of the celestial kingdom, one can inherit that glory. If one cannot abide that glory, perhaps one can abide the law and inherit the glory of a lesser kingdom. Those who cannot abide any law from Christ—those who are laws unto themselves and fully desire to abide in sin—are “not meet for a kingdom of glory” but “must abide a kingdom which is not a kingdom of glory” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:21–24). This group (described as sons of perdition in section 76) will be quickened or resurrected to “enjoy that which they are willing to receive, because they were not willing to enjoy that which they might have received. For what doth it profit a man if a gift is bestowed upon him and he receive not the gift? Behold, he rejoices not in that which is given unto him, neither rejoices in him that is the giver of the gift” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:32–33).

Sons of perdition are said to knowingly deny Christ’s truth: “Having denied the Holy Spirit after having received it, and having denied the Only Begotten Son of the Father [‘after the Father has revealed him’ (Doctrine and Covenants 76:43)], having crucified him unto themselves and put him to an open shame” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:35). These do not simply
turn from Christ but, as section 76 says, “deny the truth and defy [his] power” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:31; emphasis added).

Those of the telestial kingdom reject both the testimony of Jesus and the gospel of Christ, saying they are some of Christ and some of Paul and Moses and Cephas (Christ’s prophets) but not turning fully to Christ and his gospel, his prophets, or “the everlasting covenant” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:99–101). Interestingly, with respect to their attitude toward Christ, the text reads, “These all shall bow the knee, and every tongue confess to him, . . . [receiving] a place in the mansions prepared [being] servants of the Most High.” There are limits to the rewards, for “where God and Christ dwell they cannot come, worlds without end” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:110–12).

With respect to Christ and what is received of him, the terrestrial kingdom is said to be populated with those who receive the testimony of Jesus (either in this life or in the next) but do not remain valiant in that testimony and do not receive the fullness of the gospel. The reception of the testimony of Jesus and the failure to be valiant in that testimony seems to mark those in this kingdom, who are among the resurrection of the just, and are described as the honorable men of the earth—the kind of people, I take it, who you’d like to have be your neighbor. “These are they who receive of the presence of the Son, but not of the fullness of the Father” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:77). There is a good deal of reception (more than just an acknowledgment) of the Christ here—of his law and light and of his person, but not of a fullness.

In the celestial kingdom dwell those who “received the testimony of Jesus and believed on his name and were baptized after the manner of his burial, being buried in the water in his name, and this according to the commandment which he has given—that by keeping the commandments they might be washed and cleansed from all their sins, and receive the Holy Spirit by the laying on of the hands of him who is ordained and sealed unto this power; and who overcome by faith, and are sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, which the Father sheds forth upon all those who are just and true” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:51–53).

Additionally, with reference to their relation to Christ, we read that they are of the Church of the Firstborn and that “they are gods, even the sons of God—wherefore, all things are theirs, whether life or death, or things present, or things to come, all are theirs and they are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s. And they shall overcome all things. Wherefore, let no man glory in man, but rather let him glory in God, who shall subdue all enemies under his feet. These shall
dwell in the presence of God and his Christ forever and ever” (Doctrine and

We learn that those of the celestial kingdom are “just men made perfect through Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, who wrought out this perfect atonement through the shedding of this blood.” And we read that “they who dwell in his presence” (and here the text refers to the Father) “are the church of the Firstborn; and they see as they are seen, and know as they are known, having received of his fulness and of his grace; and he makes them equal in power, and in might, and in dominion” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:69, 94–95). Those in this kingdom certainly followed Christ and received from him grace for grace, as section 93 confirms. All of this, of course, shows not only the path one takes to be with him but also the relation of oneness we can be brought into.5

**Obeying Christ Sanctifies Us**

Section 93 shows how Christ grew from grace to grace, receiving and returning grace to his Father, and how we worship by following Christ and, through him, grow grace for grace and “come to the Father in [Christ’s] name, and in due time receive of his fulness” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:19; see Doctrine and Covenants 93:11–20). The heart of our worship becomes discipleship—emulation of Christ.6 He is the way of our return, and any truth, law, light, goodness, or holiness we attain must be subservient to and put in the service of our heartfelt, whole-souled discipleship. The way he governs individuals and his Church is an integral element of that discipleship, both because the law reveals what the Lord asks of his people but also because it reveals the way Christ lives—the way he is, indeed, the way he himself is governed by his Father’s will—and therefore what we are to seek to be like. Thus law is an essential aspect of the life of emulative worship.7 Such worship is founded on and given life by recognizing that the law we follow is not simply a set of principles, stipulations, and commandments (though these play a crucial role) but rather a life of worship founded on obedience to Christ himself, who embodies the law.

Significantly, section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants holds a high place for law, setting forth what law has the potential to do: “That which is governed by law is also preserved by law and perfected and sanctified by the same.” Those that allow themselves to be governed by law will experience its preserving, perfecting, and sanctifying power. Conversely, for those
who refuse to be governed by law, there follow inevitable and lasting consequences: “That which breaketh a law, and abideth not by law, but seeketh to become a law unto itself, and willeth to abide in sin, and altogether abideth in sin, cannot be sanctified by law, neither by mercy, justice, nor judgment. … [but will] remain filthy still” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:34–35). The differences between the results of allowing law to govern us and simply doing things our way couldn’t be more stark: a condition of sanctification or an ultimate state of filthiness. Significantly, the Lord lays out kingdoms of glory (degrees somewhere between those two poles) in which one will inherit a kingdom according to his or her willingness and ability to abide the law of that kingdom (see Doctrine and Covenants 88:21–24, 36–40).

Obeying Christ Enlightens Us

In section 88, the law is equated with light that proceeds from God’s presence, lighting our eyes and understanding, filling “the immensity of space,” being in and giving life to all things, and governing all (see Doctrine and Covenants 88:11–13). At least in some measure, what is being described here is the same light or spirit that section 84 describes as being given unto all, developmentally enlightening those that follow it, and bringing those who follow it to “God, even the Father,” who “teacheth him of the covenant” (Doctrine and Covenants 84:45–48). All are given this light, though, of course, one can reject the light or receive only a portion of that light, according to what they are willing to do. Nevertheless, the Lord reveals the course laid out before those that fully receive his law or light: “That which is of God is light, and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light growth brighter and brighter until the perfect day” (Doctrine and Covenants 50:24).

This revelation implies that we have a different relationship to Christ’s law and light than the rest of the universe does. Section 88 describes law or light as governing all things, including the earth, the planets, and the universe, but it does not say the obedience of the cosmos is on the same level as that of human beings. In whatever way the earth is given law and governed by Christ, it is clear that the earth doesn’t obey as an agent in the same sense we do. It simply, inevitably, obeys, and as such fulfills the measure of its creation. Human beings, on the other hand, can receive or reject the law in varying degrees. We are agents, who, having been given the law, can receive it or not—can say yes or no to it. As such, Christ is our law, the law that can save and
sanctify us, to the degree that we allow him to fully be our law by receiving and abiding in him.

The risen Christ tells the Nephites that he is the lawgiver and that they, as his covenant people, must know the ultimate relation they have to him: “I am the law, and the light” (3 Nephi 15:9). A similar kind of thought to this “I am the law” is set forward in numerous places in which Christ identifies himself as the way, truth, light, life, and so forth. These terms, each with its own nuanced meaning, are often used synonymously, particularly in section 88, where, for instance, the Lord says “the light which is in all things” is that “which giveth life to all things” and is the “law by which all things are governed, even the power of God” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:13). All of these come together and adhere in the person of Christ, revealing a Christ-centered foundation, where the Christ of the universe, who establishes law and governs the cosmos, is likewise intimately revealed to individuals as the law that can govern their lives if they will let him.

This law extends higher than just Christ because he, as section 93 and other scriptures attest, submits to the will of his Father. Thus our law is Christ, who serves as an example and teacher of how to submit to his Father as a source for that law; as a Savior for when we haven’t kept that law, leading us through repentance; and as one who gives enabling grace in empowering us to live that law and who is himself, along with the presence of his Father, the reward for living that law. So our commitment isn’t to an abstract something or other of law or truth, but to a person.⁸

We Must Come to Know Christ

With Christ as law, we find a perfect example of such principles as justice, righteousness, mercy, truth, goodness, and holiness, not by independently working out what would be the right mix theoretically, but by observing their full, combined manifestation in Christ’s person. His will (always one with his Father’s will) will be manifest to us in what is revealed in the written word, revealed by living prophets, and revealed to us as a Church and to individuals by the light of Christ and the Holy Ghost—which, as Nephi reminds us, speaks the words of Christ (see 2 Nephi 32:3). The presence of the Holy Ghost in all of this is essential in revealing to us Christ’s will, the law.

Because Christ is a person and not simply a set of principles, stipulations, or independent governing laws or regularities, our response to law in this sense is a response to him and a coming to know him. What governs all
things is a divine person more than an ordered set of moral and universal laws (though these may follow, secondarily). In following the law of Christ spoken of in section 88 (a law which is, at times, also equated with light, love, power, and truth), we not only come to know divine law and a divine way of being, but we come to know Christ. We come to know how the law and Christ are one, even as we are made one with him.

This deeply personal aspect of Christ’s interaction with us comes out most clearly after section 88 speaks in rather cosmic language. Following the Lord’s description of his being the light and law in all things, manifesting the wonder and glory of the universe, the suns and planets and stars that move with each other in order, the Lord says, “Behold, all these are kingdoms, and any man who hath seen any or the least of these hath seen God moving in his majesty and power. I say unto you, he hath seen him; nevertheless, he who came unto his own was not comprehended. The light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehendeth it not; nevertheless, the day shall come when you shall comprehend even God, being quickened in him and by him” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:47–49).

This impressive universe is not simply something meant to awe and impress (though it does do that, especially in relation to the human being blessed to see these things with spiritual eyes); in experiencing these things, we come to know the power of the Creator and Sustainer of all this as we come to know him. When we see his hand and power in the universe, the Lord then indicates what we will ultimately come to know: “Then shall ye know that ye have seen me, that I am, and that I am the true light that is in you, and that you are in me; otherwise ye could not abound” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:50; emphasis added). The light and power speak and work within us and in our hearts, intimately, clearly and powerfully, causing us to flourish in our spiritual lives—“my voice is Spirit; my Spirit is truth; truth abideth and hath no end; and if it be in you it shall abound” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:66).

This notion of a real, personal (though thoroughly divine) person is seen in the parable of the field and the laborers—a parable used precisely to help us understand what the Lord has said in section 88 about laws being given that govern heaven and earth and planets, their orbits, and their giving light to each other, all of which manifest “God moving in his majesty and power” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:42–47). In this parable, twelve individuals are sent to labor in the field, with each being visited in turn by the man who sent
them. “And he said unto the first: Go ye and labor in the field, and in the first hour I will come unto you, and ye shall behold the joy of my countenance. And he said unto the second: Go ye also into the field, and in the second hour I will visit you with the joy of my countenance” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:52–53). The Lord sends all twelve and then visits all in succession from the first to the last:

And thus they all received the light of the countenance of their lord [and each made glad in that light, as it says of the first visited], every man in his hour, and in his time, and in his season—

Beginning at the first, and so on unto the last, and from the last unto the first, and from the first unto the last;

Every man in his own order, until his hour was finished, even according as his lord had commanded him, that his lord might be glorified in him, and he in his lord, that they all might be glorified. (Doctrine and Covenants 88:58–60)

The personal, individual care here for each laborer by the Lord must not be missed. In the vast created universe, the Lord gives attention, one by one, to each that he sends. Then, to drive this home to those first receiving the revelation of section 88, the Lord gives this for them and us to reflect on:

I say unto you, my friends, I leave these sayings with you to ponder in your hearts, with this commandment which I give unto you, that ye shall call upon me while I am near—

Draw near unto me and I will draw near unto you; seek me diligently and ye shall find me; ask, and ye shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. Whatsoever ye ask the Father in my name it shall be given unto you, that is expedient for you;

And if your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in you; and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things.

Therefore, sanctify yourselves that your minds become single to God, and the days will come that you shall see him; for he will unveil his face unto you, and it shall be in his own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will. (Doctrine and Covenants 88:62–68)

The personal reality spoken of here is likewise emphasized in section 76 with the promise that the Lord will continue to reveal the same things revealed in the vision Joseph and Sidney have, granting others the “privilege of seeing and knowing for themselves. . . [that] they may be able to bear his presence in the world of glory” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:117–18).

Similarly, in section 93 we read, “Verily, thus saith the Lord: It shall come to pass that every soul who forsaketh his sins and cometh unto me, and
calleth on my name, and obeyeth my voice, and keepeth my commandments, shall see my face and know that I am; and that I am the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world; and that I am in the Father, and the Father in me, and the Father and I are one” ( Doctrine and Covenants 93:1–3).

These sacred promises are a hallmark of the Restoration, which has, as a key principle, the teaching that a person can and must come to know God for him or herself. As President Boyd K. Packer said, the purpose of all these promises of coming to know God is not to make us sign seekers. Verse 68 of section 88 gives us the clue here—our effort should be to sanctify ourselves, leaving the revelation to God. The Lord will take care of the how and when of the revelation as he wills (see Doctrine and Covenants 88:68).

**Christ Ultimately Saves Us**

Another implication in all of this is that it isn’t the law that saves a person. Christ does. And this isn’t just to say that the law alone can’t save us. Clearly it can’t. We all fall short, not only with our sinfulness but in our failure to actually abide the law in the highest sense. It isn’t just that we are sinful, but even should we be forgiven and set right, we simply aren’t up to snuff with the divine attributes that the law demands. Even if we were to obey perfectly, something would be missing if the law were an independent reality, not bound up in and leading us to Christ. Then again, if we see that Christ is the law, in that sense the law (or Christ) does save us. That may be the meaning we should take from verse 34 of section 88: “That which is governed by law is also preserved by law and perfected and sanctified by the same.” Clearly scripture teaches that the law can’t save us, and yet this passage says it is precisely the law which perfects and sanctifies us. One way to solve this seeming tension is simply to read Christ as the law that saves, and conclude that the law he gives in itself will save only as it points us to him and we turn to him.

Of course, the written given law has a place. The Lord himself gives it to us, and it is one of the ways the Lord manifests his will to us. But its ultimate fulfillment comes in the form of the life-giving power in the relationship it creates between the lawgiver and the follower. Thus, we might see the given law as secondary to, or an extension of, Christ. It is the note left by a loved one on the table, so to speak, that serves a real purpose as a communication from a real person. To have the effect it should have, the proper obedience of any divine law must consist of a response to, obedience to, and submission to him, not something independent of him.
A key passage that comes to mind when speaking of law and the life of discipleship is the statement that links obedience to law with the reception of blessings: “There is a law irrevocably decreed in heaven . . . upon which all blessings are predicated—and when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law” (Doctrine and Covenants 130:20–21). It would be easy to read this as a kind of self-sustaining law, independent from God, which one follows and gets the desired, inevitable results. You put in the obedience coin, so to speak, and the blessing can be received. I’ve even heard some say that when you obey God has to bless you, as if we control what blessings we receive and how. The point I hope to show is that our obedience is to a being, not to an independent law apart from or beyond him, and that this will show a better reading of this passage that does not put God out of the process.

Of course, from a certain point of view, we might look and say that some aspect of the law may, generally speaking, be true or good whether one believed in God or not. Society might see that it is good not to kill, steal, lie, and so forth. We might note that marital fidelity is good for individuals and families and societies. Those things seem to be a visible, obvious good whether individuals or societies believe God is real and is behind those laws or not.

But the reality of God establishing divine law and himself being the law makes a tremendous difference when seen from the full perspective of discipleship. There are good reasons for believing why the reality of God is necessary and, in the fullest sense, a way of happiness and a law that governs the life of a Latter-day Saint disciple of Christ, that the most prominent of which is that Christ serves as exemplar of the law, as the lawgiver and source of law, but also as the law himself.

Thus, with respect to section 130, a better way to read that is not to say that there is a specific, independent blessing associated with specific behavior, but rather that the principle spoken of is the principle of aligning ourselves with God’s will and then asking in faith, under the guidance of the Spirit, for that which, in specific terms used in the scripture, is good, right, and expedient (Moroni 7:26; 3 Nephi 18:20; Doctrine and Covenants 88:64). The principle is asking according to God’s will—a will that shall be made known to us, always according to the Lord’s own time, way, and will (2 Nephi 4:35; Doctrine and Covenants 46:30). Clearly wonderful, even specific, blessings come from following the laws of marital fidelity, tithing, sacrifice, the Word
of Wisdom, and so forth, but whatever attendant blessings may come from those, that which underlies them all—the blessing we get from any true obedience—is found in being reconciled to God and the blessings that come (in good times or in bad) of being properly related to God, in growing to know and be like our Father through our submission to and following of Christ. Our obedience to any law or principle is not experienced properly, is not true obedience, if it is not, to the core, an obedience to Christ as the law. All the laws and principles of the gospel are wrapped up together in a totality of our discipleship of him.

Notes

1. The idea of Christ as law, truth, way, and life (again, terms that in the scriptures are often used interchangeable) and he himself being our foundation has been made by others also. For instance, Dietrich Bonhoeffer argues that cheap grace is grace as a principle or a system, and not the costly grace received from Christ in our genuinely seeking to be his disciples. *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 45–46. Similarly, the Danish Christian thinker Soren Kierkegaard argues, “The Christian Thesis is not: *intelligere ut credam*, nor is it *credere, ut intelligam*. No, it is: Act according to the command and orders of Christ; do the will of the Father—and you will become a believing person.” Soren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967–78), 3:363. Similar ideas of the centrality of Christ over a system can be found among Latter-day Saint philosophers such as James E. Faulconer, “Truth, Virtue, and Perspectivism,” in *Virtue and the Abundant Life*, ed. Lloyd D. Newell, Terrence D. Olsen, Emily M. Reynolds, and Richard Williams (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 65–89. See also C. Terry Warner, “Commitment and Life’s Meaning,” in *To the Glory of God: Mormon Essays on Great Issues*, ed. Truman G. Madsen and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 33–62. See also C. Terry Warner’s entry, “Truth,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 4:1489–91.

2. As quoted in Elder Neil L. Anderson’s Facebook page, April 1, 2017 (emphasis added). Sister Porter reports, “From that point forward, Bruce focused on becoming a servant and a friend of Christ. His allegiance was not to a list, but to a person.”

3. Doctrine and Covenants 76:82 also confirms that they reject the testimony of Jesus and the gospel.


5. This paper has focused on the individual in his or her relationship to Christ as the law. Of course, even that individual is not an isolated being. We are members one of another, says Paul. Indeed, the Doctrine and Covenants speaks of the Lord’s people, a Church, Zion, and so forth. Even the celestial kingdom is a place of a society, with those there being said to be of the Church of the Firstborn. All of this, of course, indicates that we might profitably ask
how the idea of Christ as law would play out in more communal, ecclesiastical aspects. Such an important discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

6. As Elder Bruce R. McConkie has stated, “True and perfect worship consists in following in the steps of the Son of God; it consists in keeping the commandments and obeying the will of the Father to that degree that we advance from grace to grace until we are glorified in Christ as he is in his Father. It is far more than prayer and sermon and song. It is living and doing and obeying. It is emulating the life of the great Exemplar.” Bruce R. McConkie, “How to Worship, Ensign, December 1971, 130.

7. Though section 88 does talk about how the worlds are created, maintained, perfected, even sanctified by law, it is not my purpose in this paper to deal with those at length. My purpose is to concentrate on how law operates in the lives of God’s children. There may be similarities in how human beings follow law in the same way the world, animals, and plants follow laws, but this is going to be different because none of these are children of God in the same human beings are, and none of these are said to be agents in the full sense that human beings are. For a helpful distinction between law of nature (law here is more a description of what things do) and the law God gives human beings, see C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (New York: HarperOne, 1952), book 1, chapter 1, “The Law of Human Nature.”

8. This isn’t just to say that our commitment is to the spirit of the law, as opposed to the letter of the law (interpreted as the underlying reason or intent of the law), but to say the law (which will include the spirit and the letter of the law) is bound up in Christ, who manifests to us what the law is and means in the variety of situations, including where the written law may not clearly show what we should be doing.
The book of Revelation was important enough to Joseph Smith that he took the time to ponder the book, identify questions that he had, and approach the Lord with those questions, providing a model (section 77) for how we can find resolutions to many of our own questions as we endeavor to understand the scriptures.
Section 77 and Book of Revelation Scholarship

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The book of Revelation is a complicated book, to say the least. For those of us who teach courses covering the book of Revelation, we often rely upon Joseph Smith’s questions and answers on the book of Revelation, now canonized as Doctrine and Covenants 77, as a means of providing some answers to all the mysterious complexity John’s vision presents to us. However, the question inevitably arises as to how closely the answers provided in section 77 adhere to the text of the book of Revelation as well as the opinion of New Testament scholars, both those contemporary to Joseph Smith and those writing now. Essentially, what my students are curious about is the uniqueness of section 77’s answers. Do they provide distinctive, heretofore unknown solutions to the book of Revelation’s riddles, or do they largely follow the general scholarly consensus (if there even is such a thing when it comes to Revelation)?

I typically answer with something like “Kind of.” Yes, there are times when section 77 fits nicely with how scholars have interpreted Revelation, but section 77 also provides unique insights that are absent from many academic works. However, this kind of answer feels inadequate. In an attempt to be able to provide some firmer answers to my students’ inquiries, I decided to
compare section 77’s answers to a variety of prominent commentaries on the book of Revelation, some from the era of Joseph Smith and others more modern. The results of that project are what follows here. To be clear, the purpose of this project is not to question the answers delivered through Joseph Smith through revelation (however that process may have worked) but to evaluate how those answers align with other students of the book of Revelation as a way of helping students appreciate section 77’s contributions.

G. K. Chesterton famously stated, “Though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature as wild as one of his own commentators.”¹ The book of Revelation tends to bring out the unpredictable in its readers, as its hundreds of different commentaries can attest. Because the number of books and commentaries on Revelation is enormous, I am going to focus primarily on six specific commentaries—three older, three recent—to use as points of comparison for section 77, all by non-Latter-day Saint scholars.² The three older commentaries are Adam Clarke’s The Holy Bible with a Commentary and Critical Notes, volume 6 (1817);³ E. B. Elliott’s Horae Apocalypticae; or, A Commentary on the Apocalypse, 2 vols. (1844); and R. H. Charles’s A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John, 2 vols. (1920). My reasons for picking these three are both their propinquity with Joseph Smith (at least for the first two) and their impact historically on the study of the book of Revelation. The second group of three commentaries consists of David E. Aune’s Revelation, 3 vols. (1998); G. K. Beale’s The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text (1999); and Craig R. Koester’s Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (2014). My reason for picking these last three is that they are, in my opinion, the three best commentaries on the book of Revelation currently available. Where applicable, I will also direct the reader’s attention to other valuable commentaries, such as those written by J. M. Ford,⁴ Robert H. Mounce,⁵ Robert L. Thomas,⁶ Wilfrid J. Harrington,⁷ Grant R. Osborne,⁸ Ben Witherington III,⁹ Brian K. Blount,¹⁰ and John Christopher Thomas.¹¹

A brief note on the context of Doctrine and Covenants 77: Section 77 was received sometime in March 1832, while Joseph was staying in Hiram, Ohio.¹² Joseph had been engaged in his revision of the New Testament, and his later history would record, “I received the following explanation of the Revelations of Saint John.”¹³ It is also possible that his recent experience with “The Vision” (section 76) had increased Smith’s desire to understand the book of Revelation, wherein John had recorded an account of his own vision.
Unfortunately, section 77 covers only the first eleven chapters of the book of Revelation, as Joseph had received instructions to “omit the translation for the present time.”\(^\text{14}\) As far as we know, Joseph never returned to the project, although he would employ the same question and answer technique with the “Sample of Pure Language” document that same March. This revelation, which in its earliest form was entitled “Revelation Explained,” was first published in the Nauvoo periodical *Times and Seasons* on August 1, 1844 and was subsequently canonized as section 77 of the Doctrine and Covenants in 1876.

*A brief note on methodology*: To keep things as simple as possible, I will employ the following methodology. I will reproduce each verse of section 77, followed by what our six commentators say and my own comments. As previously mentioned, relevant comments made by other scholars of the book of Revelation will be included in the footnotes. Additionally, I have divided the answer portions of several verses from section 77 into (a) and (b) sections. I have found that the answer portions tend to have a two-tiered approach. The first part of an answer section, what I term (a), tends to be a fairly general reading, one that adheres more closely to the logical reading of the text. The second part of an answer section, what I term (b), tends to be where the unique material is present.

**Doctrine and Covenants 77:1**

Q. What is the sea of glass spoken of by John, 4th chapter, and 6th verse of the Revelation?

A. (a) It is the earth, (b) in its sanctified, immortal, and eternal state.

*Clarke*: No comment.

*Elliott*: “The firmament of blue transparent ether above the heads of the four throne-upholders, in which the cloud floated.”\(^\text{15}\)

*Charles*: “The waters above the firmament. These waters rest on the firmament, and apparently over them God’s throne was originally conceived as established.”\(^\text{16}\)

*Aune*: “This is probably based on an allusion to Ezek 1:22, where the prophet sees ‘the likeness of a firmament, shining like crystal,’ spread out over the heads of the living creatures. One of the features of the temple of Solomon was an enormous bronze basin of water mounted on twelve bronze oxen, three facing each of the cardinal directions.”\(^\text{17}\)
Beale: It “may reflect (1) the laver in Solomon’s temple, (2) God’s holy separateness and splendor in heaven, or especially (3) the heavenly analogue to the Red Sea.”

Koester: “At creation God was said to have established a dome over the earth. Above the dome were the waters of heaven, and beyond this was God’s throne or dwelling place. Ezekiel said the dome, or firmament, looked like crystal beneath the throne of God.”

Comment: Commentators are largely in agreement that the “sea of glass” refers to either (1) the Earth, whether speaking of the firmament or dome that covered the Earth (separating it from the waters of heaven) and upon which the throne of God rested in Israelite cosmology or the heavenly waters themselves, or (2) the “brazen sea,” the laver of water that rested upon the back of twelve oxen and stood in the courtyard of Solomon’s temple (although the latter has cosmic significance in its own right). Section 77’s (a) revealed answer seems largely in line with these ideas. The sea of glass, in some way, represents the Earth. Where section 77 could be seen to differ is in (b) seeing the sea of glass as the Earth itself in a sanctified, sacred state rather than as the waters or the dome themselves, looking ahead to the Earth’s future transformation rather than back at its past creation.

Doctrine and Covenants 77:2–3

Q. What are we to understand by the four beasts, spoken of in the same verse?

A. (a) They are figurative expressions, used by the Revelator, John, in describing heaven, the paradise of God, the happiness of man, and of beasts, and of creeping things, and of the fowls of the air; that which is spiritual being in the likeness of that which is temporal; and that which is temporal in the likeness of that which is spiritual; the spirit of man in the likeness of his person, as also the spirit of the beast, and every other creature which God has created.

Q. Are the four beasts limited to individual beasts, or do they represent classes or orders?

A. (b) They are limited to four individual beasts, which were shown to John, to represent the glory of the classes of beings in their destined order or sphere of creation, in the enjoyment of their eternal felicity.

Clarke: “These creatures may be considered the representatives of the whole creation.”
Elliott: “But from what seems certain respecting Ezekiel’s four living creatures, or cherubim, the natural and almost necessary inference respecting the four that appeared to St. John is surely this, that as in their form and position they resembled Ezekiel’s cherubim, so in their nature and functions they must have resembled them also; and thus have symbolized beings of angelic nature, appointed, in that character, to ministrations near and confidential in the conduct of the Lord’s providential government. . . . Thus, and in this manner, I conclude that the . . . four living creatures of the Apocalyptic vision, symbolized the church of the redeemed ones . . . representing specially that part of the church which has past from earth to paradise.”

Charles: “To the writer of the Apocalypse these four Living Creatures . . . are simply an order of angels, and apparently the highest, or one of the highest orders.”

Aune: “The four living creatures . . . are based on OT conceptions of the angelic seraphim and cherubim, depicted as located both above and beneath the throne of God. After the time of Irenaeus, the four creatures came to symbolize the four Gospels and have suggested to some the relative chronological order of each of the Gospels.”

Beale: “Whether or not a zodiacal background is in mind, it is likely that the four figures are designed to be representative of the whole created order of animate life, a view also held by other commentators. . . . Are the four living beings intended to be understood as literal heavenly creatures of a high angelic order?”

Koester: “In Ezekiel’s throne vision such creatures drew God’s throne chariot (Ezek 1:15–21), whereas in Revelation they have a new role as representatives of creation.”

Comment: Section 77’s answers to these two questions contain both figurative and literal elements. On the one hand, the four beasts (or, more accurately, ζώα, “living things”) figuratively represent “heaven,” “paradise,” and the happiness of the humans and beasts who inhabit them. From this perspective, section 77’s (a) response can be seen in the work of Clarke, Beale, and Koester, who see them as representative of a larger created order, whereas our other commentators interpreted them as angelic beings in line with similar throne theophany scenes from Ezekiel 1 or Isaiah 6.

On the other hand, (b) while the four beasts “represent the glory of the classes of beings in their destined order,” the four beasts, section 77 suggests, were literally four actual beasts. In a later statement, Joseph would remark
that these four beasts “were four of the most noble animals that had filled
the measure of their creation, and had been saved from other worlds, because
they were perfect; they were like angels in their sphere; we are not told where
they came from, and I do not know.” \footnote{30} Interpreted in this way, section 77’s
answer is largely unique.

**Doctrine and Covenants 77:4**

Q. What are we to understand by the eyes and wings, which the beasts had?

A. (a) Their eyes are a representation of light and knowledge, that is, they
are full of knowledge; and their wings are a representation of power, to move,
to act, etc.

*Clarke*: Discusses the idea that this is the typical description of an angel
but says little about any symbolic meanings.

*Elliott*: Discusses the idea that this is the typical description of an angel
but says little about any symbolic meanings.

*Charles*: Discusses the idea that this is the typical description of an angel
but says little about any symbolic meanings.

*Aune*: Discusses the idea that this is the typical description of an angel but
says little about any symbolic meanings.

*Beale*: “The likelihood is that they (wings) are only a symbolic depiction,
since they differ from both the models in Isaiah 6 and in Ezekiel 1, which
also differ. . . . The portrayal of ‘fullness of eyes’ on animal figures could be a
general history-of-religions symbol associated with deity.” \footnote{31}

*Koester*: “The six wings are reminiscent of the heavenly beings in Isa 6:2–
3. Earlier, in Rev 4:6, the living creatures were said to be covered with eyes
on the front and the back, and here they have eyes outside and inside. The
descriptions suggest that they see in all directions and keep watch continu-
ously, like the ‘sleepless ones who guard the throne of his glory.’” \footnote{32}

*Comment*: The majority of our commentators see the “wings” and the
“eyes” as a literal description of what John sees, primarily because they see the
four “beasts” as angels and descriptions of angels in Jewish literature typically
portray them with such exaggerated features. If they see any symbolism in
those features, they do not mention it. Beale and Koester come closest to
section 77’s answer (as do most other modern commentators) in implying
something more symbolic or figurative, such as a manner of deity or compre-
hensive sight. Section 77’s response focuses primarily upon the symbolic—the
“beasts” may have actually appeared this way but the “wings” \footnote{33} and the “eyes” \footnote{34}
symbolize a crucial component of the beasts, namely their watchfulness and speed.

**Doctrine and Covenants 77:5**

Q. What are we to understand by the four and twenty elders, spoken of by John?

A. We are to understand that these elders whom John saw, (a) were elders who had been faithful in the work of the ministry and were dead; (b) who belonged to the seven churches, and were then in the paradise of God.

*Clarke:* “Perhaps this is in reference to the smaller Sanhedrin at Jerusalem, which was composed of twenty-three elders; or to the princes of the twenty-four courses of the Jewish priests which ministered at the tabernacle and the temple, at first appointed by David.”

*Elliott:* “Moreover, as regards the elders, thus much was also evident, that they represented the redeemed saints in the character of a royal priesthood. . . . Again, as to their number 24, it might be explained either, as some expositors suggest, by reference to the twelve patriarchs, the heads of the Old Testament church, and the twelve apostles of the New; or rather, as others, by reference to the heads of the twenty-four courses of the Jewish priesthood, the fit representatives of the whole priestly body.”

*Charles:* Angelic representatives of the twenty-four priestly courses or the entire body of the faithful.

*Aune:* Aune lays out seven possibilities: (1) heavenly counterparts of the twenty-four priestly courses; (2) twenty-four divisions of musician descendants of Levi; (3) heavenly representatives of Israel and the Church; (4) individual Christians who sealed their faith through martyrdom; (5) the saints in the Old Testament; (6) angelic messengers of the heavenly court; and (7) figures from astral mythology. He then concludes: “There have been many attempts to identify the twenty-four elders of Revelation 4–5, though no solution has found universal acceptance. Since no other early Jewish or early Christian composition depicts God in his heavenly court surrounded by twenty-four elders, it is probable that John himself has created the twenty-four elders for this scene.”

*Beale:* “The elders certainly include reference to OT and NT saints. They are either angels representing all saints or the heads of the twelve tribes together with the twelve apostles, representing thus all the people of God. Identification of them as angels is consonant with some of our earlier
observations that many of the traits and functions characteristic of angels are likewise applicable to humans. Probably the elders are angels who are identified with the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles, thus representing the entire community of the redeemed of both testaments.18

Koester: Koester lays out Aune’s categories before writing, “The elders do not fit standard categories,” and suggesting that readers focus on their “literary functions” rather than trying to identify them with a knowable pre-existing group.19

Comment: Most commentators are largely split on the question of whether these twenty-four beings are angels or humans.40 Section 77’s (a) answer identifies the elders as twenty-four specific, historical persons who were members of the seven churches listed in Revelation 2–3. From this perspective, section 77 could be seen to be largely in agreement with those who also see the twenty-four elders as historical people who at one time lived upon the earth, even if they are representative of a larger body in Revelation 4. Where section 77 is unique, again, is in its (b) answer. Section 77 states that these twenty-four elders belonged to the seven churches mentioned in Revelation 2–3. This opens up the fascinating possibility that some of them had been known personally by John, as his residence in Ephesus (prior to his exile) would have placed him in their vicinity. From this perspective, section 77’s answer is unique, as none of our commentators make such an identification. However, it should be said that if section 77:5 intended “seven churches” figuratively to represent the entire church and those redeemed through the blood of the Savior, then some of the answers given by our commentators, such as Elliott, Charles, Aune, and Beale, are more on point and section 77 is less unique.

Doctrine and Covenants 77:6

Q. What are we to understand by the book which John saw, which was sealed on the back with seven seals?

A. We are to understand that (a) it contains the revealed will, mysteries, and the works of God; the hidden things of his economy (b) concerning this earth during the seven thousand years of its continuance, or its temporal existence.

Clarke: “That is, the book was full of solemn contents within, but it was sealed; and on the back side was a superscription indicating its contents. It was a labelled book, or one written on each side of the skin, which was
not usual. . . . The matter of the book was so obscure and enigmatical, and the work it enjoined and the facts it predicted so difficult and stupendous, that they could neither be known nor performed by human wisdom or power.”

Clarke added that to open the book would be “to explain and execute all the purposes and decrees of God, in relation to the government of the world and the Church.”

Elliott: “The events of the coming future as written in the Book in the right hand of the enthroned One, was to mark them as all preordained in his eternal counsels, yet the chief object of their being there written must have been, I think, that of signifying what it is now our purpose to consider,—the plan, order, and grand divisions of the prophecy.”

Charles: “The divine decrees and destinies of the world, . . . a profound secret which can only be revealed through the mediation of the Lamb.”

Aune: “Narrow conceptions of the significance of the scroll maintain that the author intended his audience to understand that the contents are identical with all or part of the narration of eschatological events that follow the breaking of the first seal in Rev 6:1 (perhaps even with the entire book of Revelation itself). . . . Broader conceptions of the contents of the scroll hold that it has little or nothing to do with the narrative of eschatological events in part or all of the remainder of the book.” These “broader conceptions” include seeing it as a “book of destiny,” the “book of life,” a “record of the sins of humankind,” the “Old Testament,” or a “bill of divorce.”

Beale: “The ‘book’ in ch. 5 should be understood as a covenantal promise of an inheritance when seen in the light of the above two identifications of the ‘book’ and of the broader theological context of the Apocalypse concerning paradise lost and regained. God promised to Adam that he would reign over the earth. Although Adam forfeited this promise, Christ, the last Adam, was to inherit it. A human person had to open the book because the promise was made to humanity.”

Koester: Koester lists four possibilities, with the most likely being “Visions disclosed later in Revelation,” followed by “God’s plan for the world,” “The scroll of life,” and least likely, “The Scriptures.” His reasoning for arguing for the first of these is “Briefly, the scroll of God is received by Christ the Lamb, who opens the seals in 6:1–8:1. Then an angel gives the open scroll to John in 10:1–11, and John reveals the contents through the prophecies that follow. The scroll is summarized in 11:1–15 and disclosed more fully in 12:1–22:5. Some interpreters think the contents begin to be revealed at 6:1 as the seals
are opened, so the scroll contains all of 6:1–22:5, but it is more likely that the contents are revealed only after all seven seals have been broken.”

Comment: Our commentators (and most others) tend to fall into two major opinions: the scroll references the eschatological events that follow the opening of the seals and continue throughout Revelation, or the scroll encompasses the entire history of the Earth’s existence, including, but not limited to, the eschatological events that follow the breaking of the seals. Section 77’s response falls squarely into the second category.

**Doctrine and Covenants 77:7**

Q. What are we to understand by the seven seals with which it was sealed?

A. We are to understand that the first seal contains the things of the first thousand years, and the second also of the second thousand years, and so on until the seventh.

Clarke: “The calamities which should fall on the enemies of Christianity, and particularly the Jews, are pointed out.”

Elliott: “The secrets of futurity.” Here Elliott specifies the six seals as covering temporal affairs from AD 96 until 395.

Charles: The first six seals each represent one of the eschatological events foretold by Jesus in the Olivet discourse. Thus, the first seal means war, the second seal means international strife, and so forth.

Aune: “A variety of plagues.”

Beale: “The divine decree of suffering.”

Koester: “The threats conveyed by the seals challenge the idea that the current world order offers security. Rhetorically, this vision affirms what afflicted readers already know to be true. For those at Smyrna, violence and economic hardship are present realities (2:9–11), and the martyrs under the altar voice the questions about divine justice that those who suffer would ask. But for readers who flourish in the imperial world (3:17), the visions are designed to be unsettling.”

Comment: As we can see, the majority of our commentators view the seals as representing the eschatological calamities or judgments of God that will occur at a point in time, whether in John’s era or one in our future. The closest of our commentators to section 77’s answer is Elliott, who sees the seals as representing specific periods of time in the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. It is not uncommon, especially for those who write in a historical perspective, to interpret the scrolls as periods of time, but that
time typically begins in the first century AD, or John’s time, and describes the evolution of the Christian church. Section 77’s information here extends these periods of time back to the beginning of time and concludes only at the end of the Earth’s temporal existence.59 This viewpoint puts section 77’s perspective closer to the camp of premillennial dispensationalists or those who promote the “millennial day” theory that postulates (based largely upon a reading of 2 Peter 3:8) the Earth’s existence to encompass seven thousand years, with the seventh thousand-year period serving as a millennial Sabbath.60 But section 77’s application of that theory to the seven seals is, I think, what is largely unique here. One could perhaps argue that “1,000” refers to simply a long period of time rather than 1,000 literal years, since “a thousand” was used figuratively in that sense.61 In that case, the Earth’s existence could simply be understood as consisting of seven lengthy periods of time, with this dispensation of the fulness of times representing a sixth, lengthy period and the millennium a seventh, lengthy period.

Doctrinal and Covenants 77:8

Q. What are we to understand by the four angels, spoken of in the 7th chapter and 1st verse of Revelation?

A. We are to understand that they are (a) four angels sent forth from God, to whom is given power over the four parts of the earth, to save life and to destroy; (b) these are they who have the everlasting gospel to commit to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people; having power to shut up the heavens, to seal up unto life, or to cast down to the regions of darkness.

Clarke: “The four angels holding the four winds of heaven” who attend to “the extreme parts of the land of Judea.”62

Elliott: “Four destroying tempest-angels, just now under temporary restraint, but destined ere while evidently to desolate the Roman earth.”63

Charles: “A lower order of angelic being. They are set over the works of nature.”64

Aune: “Four angels standing at the four corners of the earth.”65

Beale: “Four angels” who are “standing on the four corners of the earth [which] refers to their sovereignty over the whole world. . . . That the winds must be held back to prevent their harmful activity is evidence of their rebellious and wicked nature. They are evil angelic agents of judgment.”66

Koester: “They are God’s angels, who can threaten earth and sea. Since they have been ‘given’ power, they are under God’s authority.”67
Comment: All of our commentators are more or less in agreement that the four angels are sent by God to prevent something that could be catastrophic for the entirety (four parts or corners/land and sea) of the Earth. In this case, section 77’s answer aligns pretty well with how most commentators interpret Revelation 7:1. Again, the (b) material provides additional information about what these angels are qualified to do. Whereas Revelation simply says that the angels retain the winds from doing damage to the Earth, section 77 adds that the angels have an evangelizing and a sealing function in addition to the power granted them to prevent the winds.

Doctrine and Covenants 77:9

Q. What are we to understand by the angel ascending from the east, Revelation 7th chapter and 2nd verse?

A. We are to understand that (a) the angel ascending from the east is he to whom is given the seal of the living God over the twelve tribes of Israel; wherefore, he crieth unto the four angels having the everlasting gospel, saying: Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads. And, (b) if you will receive it, this is Elias which was to come to gather together the tribes of Israel and restore all things.

Clarke: “This angel is represented as the chancellor of the supreme King, and as ascending from the east. . . . Some understand this of Christ.”68

Elliott: A “sealing Angel.”69

Charles: No comment.

Aune: An “angel bearing the signet of God.”70

Beale: “This angel is a harbinger of grace, since he has the ‘seal of the living God.'”71

Koester: No comment.

Comment: The first part of section 77’s answer, on one hand, fits well with our commentators, primarily because pretty much all are in agreement that this angel is righteous, possesses a seal, and has seniority over the four angels from 77:1. That part is pretty straightforward. On the other hand, section 77’s (b) material once again adds additional information, in this case that this angel is “Elias,” whose charge was the gathering of Israel and the restoration of all things. If “Elias” is seen as Jesus Christ, as Joseph Smith Translation, John 1:28 suggests, then Clarke’s comment that “Some understand this of Christ” is relevant.74 But if Elias is seen as a composite being or another individual prophet named Elias, then section 77’s information is largely unique.
Doctrine and Covenants 77:10
Q. What time are the things spoken of in this chapter to be accomplished?
   A. They are to be accomplished in the sixth thousand years, or the opening of the sixth seal.73

Doctrine and Covenants 77:11
Q. What are we to understand by sealing the one hundred and forty-four thousand, out of all the tribes of Israel—twelve thousand out of every tribe?
   A. We are to understand that (b) those who are sealed are high priests, ordained unto the holy order of God, to administer the everlasting gospel; for they are they who are ordained out of every nation, kindred, tongue, and people, by the angels to whom is given power over the nations of the earth, to bring as many as will come to the church of the Firstborn.

   Clarke: “In the number of 144,000 are included all the Jews converted to Christianity; 12,000 out of each of the twelve tribes: but this must be only a certain for an uncertain number; for it is not to be supposed that just 12,000 were converted out of each of the twelve tribes.”74

   Elliott: “Which being so the twelve tribes, the large body in all its tribal completeness, must necessarily signify the whole Christian professing body in the Apocalyptic world, or Roman empire; the latter, God’s true servants out of it. In the figurative language of the Apocalypse, the one was the professing Israel, the other the Israel of God, or true Israel. . . . God had out of each his election of grace.”75

   Charles: “It is not believers descended from literal Israel but from spiritual Israel that are here referred to.”76

   Aune: Aune gives five possibilities: “(1) the faithful remnant of Israel, (2) Jewish Christians, (3) Christian martyrs, (4) Christians generally, the Israel of God, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles, or (5) primarily gentile Christians, since the Jews have rejected their place.”77

   Beale: “The entire community of the redeemed.”78
   Koester: “All who are redeemed by the Lamb.”79

Comment: Section 77’s answer here is intriguing and very much unique.80 Rather than see the 144,000 as representing a particular group,81 such as the Jews, the Christians, or the community, section 77 suggests that the 144,000 are representatives from every nation on Earth, whose responsibility it is to go out and gather the Jews, the Christians, or the community. In other words, section 77 would say that the commentators are missing a link in the chain.
While the Jews, the Christians, and the community are all involved in the process, their involvement only comes to pass when the 144,000 go out and find them, but they aren’t the 144,000 themselves. The use of the title “high priest” suggests that the 144,000 must possess the Melchizedek Priesthood (Doctrine and Covenants 76:57), and will then use that priesthood to gather the nations to the “church of the Firstborn” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:54).  

**Doctrine and Covenants 77:12**

Q. What are we to understand by the sounding of the trumpets, mentioned in the 8th chapter of Revelation?

A. (a) We are to understand that as God made the world in six days, and on the seventh day he finished his work, and sanctified it, and also formed man out of the dust of the earth, even so, in the beginning of the seventh thousand years will the Lord God sanctify the earth, and complete the salvation of man, and judge all things, and shall redeem all things, except that which he hath not put into his power, when he shall have sealed all things, unto the end of all things; and the sounding of the trumpets of the seven angels are the preparing and finishing of his work, in the beginning of the seventh thousand years—the preparing of the way before the time of his coming.

*Clarke*: “Each took up his trumpet, and stood prepared to blow his blast. Wars are here indicated; the trumpet was the emblem of war.”

*Elliott*: Two purposes: (1) “to proclaim to them the epochs of advancing time;” and (2) “to proclaim war against those enemies.”

*Charles*: Eschatological judgment.

*Aune*: The blowing of the trumpets serves to introduce “a series of eschatological divine punishments.”

*Beale*: “The trumpets portray judgment on unbelievers because of their hardened attitude, thus demonstrating God’s incomparable sovereignty and glory. These judgments are not intended to evoke repentance but to punish because of the permanently hardened, unrepentant stance of the unbelievers toward God and his people.”

*Koester*: “The trumpet visions draw on the exodus tradition, but the imagery is also broader. The visions depict divine wrath in ways that would have been comprehensible throughout John’s cultural context. From a Greco-Roman perspective the plagues could be understood as warnings of the disasters that will occur if people persist in a course of action that God or the gods view unfavorably. Including such threats in the trumpet visions shows
people receiving warnings of heavenly judgment in ways that they should have been able to recognize. This makes their refusal to repent more remarkable and, at a deeper level, more plausible.\textsuperscript{98}

Comment: Section 77’s answer to this question feels more or less in line with our commentators (and most others) in seeing the trumpets as indicative of an eschatological age as we approach the Second Coming of Jesus, initiated through warnings and judgments that come about due to the prayers of the righteous in Revelation 7. The exception is the reappearance of the “millennial day” schema laid out in Doctrine and Covenants 77:7, which few, if any, agree with. One interesting distinction comes in the tone of section 77’s answer. Whereas most commentators emphasize the “war” and “plagues” and “destruction” that arrive following the blowing of the trumpets, section 77 finds a more optimistic outlook, focusing upon sanctification, redeeming, and sealing. This is not to say, though, that section 77 doesn’t acknowledge the terror that Revelation 8–9 bring, as is hinted at in the threat to exclude those “which he hath not put into his power.”

**Doctrine and Covenants 77:13**

Q. When are the things to be accomplished, which are written in the 9th chapter of Revelation?

A. They are to be accomplished after the opening of the seventh seal, before the coming of Christ.\textsuperscript{89}

**Doctrine and Covenants 77:14**

Q. What are we to understand by the little book which was eaten by John, as mentioned in the 10th chapter of Revelation?

A. (a) We are to understand that it was a mission, (b) and an ordinance, for him to gather the tribes of Israel; behold, this is Elias, who, as it is written, must come and restore all things.

*Clarke*: “There was in it some pleasing, some unpleasing, intelligence. I read of the consolations and protection of the true worshippers of God, and did \textit{rejoice}; I read of the persecutions of the Church, and was \textit{distressed}.”\textsuperscript{90}

*Elliott*: “By the \textit{book} that he held opened in his hand the instrumental means seemed figured whereby all this was to be accomplished; viz. the opening of the volume of his own book, the \textit{Bible}.”\textsuperscript{91}
Charles: The scroll contains the contents of Revelation 11:1–13, and the “sweetness” and “bitterness” represent the dual messages present in Revelation 11.

Aune: Aune speculates that “since the scroll with seven seals provides the structure, if not the content, of Rev 6:1–8:1, it is worth considering whether the same is true for the little open scroll of Rev 10.” In other words, Aune debates whether the content that follows beginning in Revelation 11 come from this second scroll.

Beale: “John’s eating of the scroll has the same meaning as Ezekiel’s, although the historical situation is different. It represented for both prophets their total identification with and submission to the divine will as a prerequisite for their service as prophetic instruments in God’s hand. Their message carries with it the power of God’s word because it is, in fact, God’s word. But John is warning not Israel but the church.”

Koester: “Eating the scroll indicates empowerment to communicate God’s word. . . . The Christian community will learn that the scroll is sweet because of its message of salvation, but it is bitter because God’s purposes will be accomplished in part through the suffering and witness of his people.”

Comment: Most of the discussion around the “little book,” including by our commentators, involves its possible connection to the “sealed book” in Revelation 5. Some see it as the same scroll, while others point to differences in the Greek terms for the two “books” (biblion in Revelation 5:1 and biblaridion in Revelation 10:9) and suggest that the first “book” contains the material in 6:1–8:5, while the “little book” contains the material found in 10:1–11 or beyond. However, section 77 rarely demonstrates a desire to investigate structural concerns or narratological issues, preferring instead something of a strict literal hermeneutic, and this trend continues here, as section 77 identifies the “little book” as something similar to a mission call, summoning John to gather the ten tribes. In this way, both Beale and Koester’s suggestions generally fit with section 77’s. What is innovative about section 77’s answer, as we have seen, is the (b) material. Terming the “little book” as an “ordinance” and describing John’s role as specifically that of gathering Israel as an “Elias” figure is largely unique. One final point: section 77’s elaboration that “John” is an “Elias” tasked with gathering Israel seems to provide a further indication that John the Revelator and John the Evangelist are to be understood as one and the same person.
Q. What is to be understood by the two witnesses, in the eleventh chapter of Revelation?

A. (b) They are two prophets that are to be raised up to the Jewish nation in the last days, at the time of the restoration, and to prophesy to the Jews after they are gathered and have built the city of Jerusalem in the land of their fathers.

*Clarke:* “This is extremely obscure; the conjectures of interpreters are as unsatisfactory as they are endless on this point. . . . Those who wish to be amused or bewildered, may have recourse both to ancients and moderns on this subject.”98

*Elliott:* In a very lengthy section, Elliott argues that the two witnesses represent those Christians whose beliefs take them outside the “orthodoxy” of the Catholic Church, with the resurrection of the witnesses being a reference to the Protestant Reformation.99

*Charles:* Moses and Elijah.100

*Aune:* “Since the people of God are both kings and priests (1:6; 5:10), it is likely that the two witnesses represent the Christian Church in its prophetic witness. Since the witnesses are identical in every respect, the fact that there are two of them is based on the notion of the reliability of two witnesses.”101

*Beale:* “The ‘two witnesses’ are not two individual prophets, whether Moses and Elijah, Enoch and Elijah, Paul and Peter, or the two Jewish high priests killed in a.d. 68. . . . Rather, they represent the whole community of faith, whose primary function is to be a prophetic witness.”101

*Koester:* “Representatives of the whole church. The witnesses combine the traits of a number of figures in Israel’s history.”103

*Comment:* As Clarke indicates, the two witnesses remain one of Revelation’s most hotly debated topics, with the various answers reaching all across the spectrum of possibility. No possibility, it seems, is off limits when it comes to interpreting these two figures. Section 77’s answer is to see the two prophets as two actual people who will be called upon at some future time to minister to the Jews and who will then, by implication, be killed and resurrected at Jerusalem. None of our commentators interpret the witnesses this way, with the majority viewing them as collectively representing, in some fashion, the faithful Christian church. The closest to section 77 is Charles, who sees the witnesses as being Moses and Elijah based upon their descriptions in 11:6.104
Final analysis: I mentioned at the beginning of the paper that when students ask me how well section 77 aligns with the general consensus of biblical scholars, I tend to answer, “Kind of.” Due to the sheer number of commentaries written on the book of Revelation and the disparate solutions those commentaries provide, it is a difficult task to assess section 77 in terms of how its perspective fits with those scholars who have studied it. This project may not be as comprehensive as it could be, but it is, I believe, representative. After researching and writing this paper, I am much more confident in saying that the answer to that question is still “Kind of.” When compared with the analysis and thoughts of scholars past and present, the answers provided in section 77 largely fall into two categories—they generally align with what other readers of the book of Revelation believe, or they provide largely unique (and often strikingly literal!) views that represent the very minority positions. A third category can be seen in those answers where section 77 answers the question with an explanation that the scholars may not support but has found support among other groups. Into the first category, where section 77 demonstrates general alignment, I would place 77:1(a); 77:2(a); 77:4(a); 77:5(a); 77:6(a); 77:8(a); 77:9(a); 77:12(a); and 77:14(a). Into the second category, where section 77 more or less diverges from what commentators say and puts forth rather unique ideas, I would place 77:1(b); 77:3(b); 77:5(b); 77:8(b); 77:9(b); 77:11(b); 77:14(b); and 77:15(b). Finally, into the third category, where section 77 provides an answer that goes outside the general scholarly consensus but is not necessarily unique, I would place 77:6(b) 77:7; 77:10; and 77:13.
The book of Revelation was an important text for Joseph Smith and the Restoration. The language of the book of Revelation appears in several places in the Book of Mormon and in the Doctrine and Covenants. Its author, John, experienced a panoptic vision on par with those of Nephi, the brother of Jared, and Joseph Smith himself, and thus provides readers insights as to how the prophetic experience can be understood. Perhaps most of all, the book of Revelation was important enough to Joseph Smith that he took the time to ponder the book, identify questions that he had, and approach the Lord with those questions, providing a model (section 77) for how we can find resolutions to many of our own questions as we endeavor to understand the scriptures. I hope that this paper will assist those who take it upon themselves to come to a better understanding of John’s remarkable text, whether because they want to engage their students on a deeper level, or because they want to better grasp how John’s vision can speak to their circumstances today.

Notes

2. My reason for choosing to focus on the work of non-Latter-day Saint scholars is that much of the work performed by Latter-day Saints on the book of Revelation tends to use section 77 as the lens through which to interpret John’s vision, and thus their work, while useful, wouldn’t necessarily be helpful here. For those who want to seek out work on the book of Revelation from a Latter-day Saint perspective, I would recommend Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2016); Jay A. Parry and Donald W. Parry, *Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), and Richard D. Draper, *Opening the Seven Seals: The Visions of John the Revelator* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991).
3. Adam Clarke and Joseph Smith have been linked in recent discussions on the origins and composition of the Joseph Smith Translation due to work by Thomas A. Wayment and others. To be clear, although my project involves Clarke as well, my project differs from Wayment’s in that I have no interest in Clarke’s relationship with section 77 other than as an example of what a scholar contemporary with Joseph Smith is saying about the book of Revelation. My use of Clarke’s work should not be taken as an implication that section 77 is reliant in any way on Clarke’s work.
12. The text of section 77 was first recorded in Revelation Book 1, 141–44 by John Whitmer between April 26 and August 1832. For a more thorough exploration of section 77’s context, see Matthew C. Godfrey et al., eds., *Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833*, vol. 2 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee et al. (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 208–9.
20. Oswalt summarizes both of these positions nicely: “The most likely allusion here is the ‘expanse’ or firmament that separated the waters in Gen. 1:7 (and perhaps also the bronze sea in Solomon’s temple),” (Oswalt, *Revelation*, 231). Both Witherington (*Revelation*, 117) and Ford (*Revelation*, 73) point out that the waters in the Hebrew Bible represented chaos and may indicate that the “sea of glass” signified that chaos may have reached into Heaven itself. R. Thomas takes a slightly different approach, suggesting that the “sea of glass” represents “the splendor and majesty of God on His throne that set Him apart from all His creation, a separation stemming from His purity and absolute holiness.” R. Thomas, *Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary*, 1:353.
21. Joseph Smith will expand on this image, identifying the angels who reside in the presence of God as being “on a globe like a sea of glass and fire,” adding, “This earth, in its sanctified and immortal state, will be made like unto crystal and will be a Urim and Thummim to the inhabitants who dwell thereon.” See Doctrine and Covenants 130:7–9.
Joseph Smith would later comment, “I suppose John saw beings there of a thousand forms that had been saved from ten thousand times ten thousand earths like this;—strange beasts of which we have no conception.” Joseph Smith History, D-1, 1523.

R. Thomas concludes several pages of summary with this description: “They are of an exalted angelic order engaged in worship . . . and whose special function in the context of the Apocalypse is the administering of divine justice in the realm of animate creation.” R. Thomas, Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary, 1:358. J. C. Thomas believes that the four beasts should be seen as “a comprehensive term for representatives of the created order, including mankind,” and have a “representative function for all of creation.” J. C. Thomas, The Apocalypse, 2:11–12. Ford comments, “The living creatures are symbolic of creation and the divine immanence. They are what is noblest (lion), strongest (ox), wisest (man), and swiftness (eagle).” Ford, Revelation, 75.

Joseph Smith History, D-1, 1523.


“The traditional interpretation of swiftness makes sense; . . . the wings must represent speed.” Oswalt, Revelation, 234. R. Thomas notes that “some have supposed that the wings depict swiftness and unlimited mobility,” but feels it more likely that the wings refer to the wings of the seraphs in Isaiah 6, which have a different purpose. R. Thomas, Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary, 1:360.

“They [eyes] signify unceasing vigilance,” (Oswalt, Revelation, 232). R. Thomas adds that the eyes represent “such penetrative intelligence that they are immediately aware of happenings pertaining to their judicial responsibility.” R. Thomas, Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary, 1:359.

Clarke, The Holy Bible with a Commentary and Critical Notes, 6:989.

Elliott, Horæ Apocalypticæ; or, A Commentary on the Apocalypse, Critical and Historical, 1:87.

Aune, Revelation 1–5, 288.


Oswalt does a nice job of summarizing the strengths and weaknesses of both positions before concluding, “From this evidence it is more likely that these are heavenly beings who reign with God and are part of the retinue surrounding his throne. Moreover, since ‘all the angels’ also stand before the throne (7:11), these must be celestial beings with a ruling function.” Oswalt, Revelation, 228–29. But see also Harrington, Revelation, 79. Blount’s observation is well worth noting here: “In the end, John is more interested in narrating the significance of the elders then he is in identifying them.” Blount, Revelation, 90.

Clarke, The Holy Bible with a Commentary and Critical Notes, 6:990.

Clarke, The Holy Bible with a Commentary and Critical Notes, 6:991.

Elliott, Horæ Apocalypticæ; or, A Commentary on the Apocalypse, Critical and Historical, 1:104.


Aune, Revelation 1–5, 344.


Commentators who lean in this direction include Mounce, who writes of the scroll that “it contains the full account of what God in his sovereign will has determined as the
destiny of the world,” and R. Thomas, who writes that the scroll “is a ‘history’ of the future that gives the successive steps leading to the inauguration of the world-kingdom of Christ.” R. Thomas’s reason for rejecting a more panoramic approach to the scroll is that “The opening of the seals does not relate to the past . . . but to things yet future at the time of writing.” R. Thomas, *Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary*, 1:377. See also discussion in Blount, *Revelation*, 99–104.

49. Other commentators who appear to lean somewhat toward a similar interpretation include Oswalt, who writes that the scroll “summarizes the whole of biblical truth, beginning with the foreshadowing of the plan in the OT and the progressive unveiling of it in Christ,” and Harrington: “The plan of God for his world, which begins to come into effect at the opening of the scroll, embraces the whole of God’s creation—in particular, the whole of humankind.” Harrington, *Revelation*, 86–87.

50. For analysis of 77:6(b), see commentary on the next verse.


52. Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ; or, A Commentary on the Apocalypse, Critical and Historical*, 1:95.


57. Other possible interpretations include “The ‘seven seals’ point to completeness, focusing on the fullness of the divine plan” (Oswalt, *Revelation*, 249); “It symbolizes an event still hidden in mystery, but divinely decreed” (R. Thomas, *Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary*, 1:380); “eschatologically and theologically significant events” (J. C. Thomas, *The Apocalypse*, 2:18); represents the idea that “history is an enigma,” therefore “Christ, and Christ alone, has the key to the meaning of human history” (George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1972], 82).

58. One potential problem with seeing the seals as being the information contained on the scroll is summarized well by Oswalt: “It is important here to note that the events of chapter 6 accompany the opening of the seals and do not constitute the contents of the scroll. The judgments of the seals are preliminary events that lead up to the unfolding drama of the eschaton and the completion of the divine plan.” Oswalt, *Revelation*, 249.

59. Intriguingly, Joseph Smith would later say that “The things which John saw had no allusion to the scenes of the days of Adam, Enoch, Abraham or Jesus, only so far as is plainly represented by John, and clearly set forth by him. John saw that only which was lying in futurity and which was shortly to come to pass.” Joseph Smith History, vol. D-1, 1522. This statement suggests that Joseph came to understand the seven seals as representing time periods that began, at the earliest, toward the end of the first century AD. This reading would bring Joseph Smith’s interpretation of the seven seals into much closer agreement with the scholars discussed above.

60. The idea that the Earth would have six thousand years of existence before the seventh thousand-year period, the Millennium, is termed by some as “the sexta-septamillennial tradition.” Texts such as Psalm 90:4, Jubilees 4:29–30, and 2 Peter 3:8 are often used to support it, and it was a viewpoint held by at least one prominent early Christian writer (see *The Epistle of Barnabas*, 15). Modern scholars today are largely critical of this approach. According to one scholar, “Even today, some people try to make eschatological predictions using the ‘day=1000 years’ idea. That entire approach is false. Peter’s statement was not
designed to prove that a day equals a thousand years, or that a thousand years equals a day. Peter’s meaning simply is that God is not limited by our notions of time.” Jonathan Menn, *Biblical Eschatology*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 64, 65n18.

61. “Rev 20 provides a reversal of Satan’s fortune for a long period represented by a thousand years.” Koester, *Revelation*, 330. This schema would be more in line with what Joseph Smith develops as “dispensations” of Earth’s history. Compare Doctrine and Covenants 128:18.


66. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 406. Here Beale interprets the “winds” as demonic beings who are being held back by the four angels.


72. R. Thomas summarizes the issue thusly: “Various special identities that have been assigned to this angel have included Christ, the Holy Spirit, an archangel, a special messenger from Christ, and the prophet Elijah. They are all mistaken. . . . He is best seen as another of the spirit beings who is distinguished because of the exalted mission committed to him.” R. Thomas, *Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary*, 1:467.

73. See commentary on Doctrine and Covenants 77:7.


75. Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ; or, A Commentary on the Apocalypse, Critical and Historical*, 1:264.


80. Perhaps one place where similarities with Doctrine and Covenants 77:11’s answer could be found is Richard Bauckham’s *Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* (London: T&T Clark, 1993), 213–37, but this would require us to reinterpret Bauckham’s argument for a “messianic army” that converts the nations as the “high priests” who gather Israel through spiritual warfare.

81. A good summary of the arguments as to the identity of the 144,000 can be found in R. Thomas, *Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary*, 473–78.

82. Latter-day Saint readers of section 77 are naturally going to have a different understanding of “seal” than other Christian readers due to the prominence of that term in sacred settings. Oswalt provides a nice summary of the different ways Christian commentators have wrestled with understanding the “seal”: “There is considerable debate as to the exact Christian experience alluded to in the ‘seal’ metaphor. Many think it is a reference to baptism, primarily because Paul calls baptism a ‘seal’ (2 Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 1:13–14). However, baptism is not specifically mentioned in these texts, and if anything it would refer
to the Holy Spirit, not baptism, as the seal. However, Aune doubts that either baptism or the Holy Spirit fits the context here. He is probably correct, for in the context it means simply that the saints belong to and are protected by God.” Oswalt, *Revelation*, 310.

84. Elliott, *Horæ Apocalypticæ; or, A Commentary on the Apocalypse, Critical and Historical*, 1:347.
89. See commentary on Doctrine and Covenants 77:7.
96. For a good summary of the differing arguments, see Oswalt, *Revelation*, 394–95.
104. This is not to say that there are not other commentators who view the two witnesses as actual eschatological figures similar to section 77. Osborne writes, “These are the two major eschatological figures expected in the last days, and that is sufficient for this context.” Osborne, *Revelation*, 418. Similarly, Ladd writes of the two witnesses that “these two prophets need not be thought of as the historical prophets Moses and Elijah returning to earth, but as two eschatological prophets who will be the embodiment of these two great prophets.” Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 155. However, this viewpoint tends to be the minority position. Mounce sums it up nicely with “Some identify them as two literal prophetic figures who will arise at the end. It is more likely, however, that they are not two individuals but a symbol of the witnessing church in the last tumultuous days before the end of the age.” Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 217. However, see also R. Thomas, who states, “Objections to the symbolic identification of the two witnesses are rather easy to come by.” Thomas, *Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary*, 2:87. For a nice summary of the dozens of possible interpretations, see Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, 126–30.
Although our perception or understanding is limited, there has always been an inseparable connection (and relevance) between priesthood power and women.
Using Section 84 to Emphasize the Priesthood Power of Women

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In the October 2019 general conference, President Russell M. Nelson expressed his yearning for the women of the Church to “understand that the restoration of the priesthood is just as relevant to you as a woman as it is to any man.” In the same talk, he invited the women to “gain, understand, and use the power with which you have been endowed” and to “study prayerfully all the truths you can find about priesthood power.” He encouraged the women to study Doctrine and Covenants sections 25, 84, and 107 as a starting point to increase their understanding. He then blessed the sisters that they might “understand the priesthood power with which [they] have been endowed.”

One year later, in the October 2020 general conference, President Nelson “renew[ed]” his “invitation” for the women of the Church to “increase your understanding of priesthood power and of temple covenants and blessings.”

This prophetic priority on women’s understanding and using priesthood power, especially in regard to the temple, has become a clear focus of Church leaders over the past decade. Consider the following talks, for example, on this topic from members of the First Presidency, senior Apostles, and female General Presidencies:
President Nelson’s specific invitations to women and men, young and old, to study all they can about the priesthood places us as religious educators in a primary position of influence, especially as we study the Doctrine and Covenants together with our students. Using Doctrine and Covenants 84:1–42 as the text, this paper will weave together doctrines, historical context, prophetic quotes, and personal analysis in each scripture block and give suggestions as to how to better help our students understand “how the
restoration of the priesthood is relevant to [women]” and more about the priesthood power with which women have been or will be endowed.

The Historical Context of Priesthood Structures: Triangulate Authoritative Sources

In studying and teaching section 84, it is important to note that throughout the history of the earth, the Lord has used two organizational structures by which to administer his priesthood. Both of these priesthood organizational structures have been revealed line upon line and used during the times of the Restoration. As the history of the priesthood is unfolded in this article, note not only the teachings but the sources used to formulate them. These sources include the teachings of Joseph Smith, modern prophets, and the standard works.

The first priesthood organizational structure that existed on this earth was patriarchal and was handed down from father to son, as noted in Doctrine and Covenants 84:6. Both Adam and Eve entered into the patriarchal priesthood, or “fullness of the Melchizedek Priesthood,” and both were promised the associated blessings or given the same guarantee from the Lord. Elder Cree-L Kofford, emeritus member of the Seventy, explained, “The patriarchal order refers to priesthood government by family organization. It originated in the time of Adam and extended down to the days of Moses, when that order was withdrawn.” This organizational structure, therefore, begins in mortality with Adam and Eve and continues through Abraham and Sarah, and on to Moses. President Ezra Taft Benson explained, however, that it was during the leadership of Moses that this patriarchal priesthood, or the highest order of the Melchizedek Priesthood, was withdrawn.

Moses taught this order of priesthood to his people and “sought diligently to sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God; but they hardened their hearts and could not enter his presence; therefore, the Lord in his wrath, for his anger was kindled against them, swore that they should not enter into his rest while in the wilderness, which rest is the fullness of his glory. Therefore, he took Moses out of their midst, and the Holy Priesthood also” (Doctrine and Covenants 84:23–25). We learn through the Joseph Smith Translation that the Lord further instructed Moses, “I will take away the priesthood out of their midst; therefore my holy order, and the ordinances thereof, shall not go before them” (JST, Exodus 34:1). In the Old World, from the time of Moses to the time of Christ, the patriarchal
priesthood, or higher order of the Melchizedek Priesthood, was not on the earth, but “the lesser priesthood continued” (Doctrine and Covenants 84:26).

During Christ’s mortal ministry, the organizational structure of his Church changed dramatically. Elder McConkie explained, “The church operates in the easiest and harmonious way because of the social setting that exists from the world. The social circumstances of the nations and the governments reflect that we can’t operate through families like they did in Abraham’s day. You can’t have civil and ecclesiastical authority combined, because the great masses of men don’t belong to the Church.” Thus his Church was organized following a more hierarchical or administrative structure with Twelve Apostles, Seventy, and so forth rather than the patriarchal or family structure used with Adam and Eve. Following Christ’s crucifixion and the ensuing death of the Apostles—both in the ancient world and in the Americas, as described in the Book of Mormon—Christ’s Church and all priesthood keys and authority were taken from the earth.

This Great Apostasy continued on the earth until May 1829, when Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were visited by John the Baptist, who ordained them to the Aaronic Priesthood, and later by Peter, James, and John, who conferred upon them the keys and authority associated with the Melchizedek Priesthood, specifically the priesthood keys of presiding. With these priesthood keys, Joseph was able to establish The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, call members of the Quorum of the Twelve and First Presidency, and perform other ecclesiastical duties within the Church. He also delegated priesthood authority for a variety of purposes including performing priesthood ordinances such as baptism and conferring the Holy Ghost, similar to the ecclesiastical structure Christ established during his mortal ministry.

The priesthood keys received by Peter, James, and John, however, did not allow for the administration of the patriarchal, or highest level of the Melchizedek Priesthood. Thus, in section 84, the Lord is speaking in future tense in regard to the temple (verses 3–4), his “house” (verse 5), and the “Holy Priesthood” (verse 6), or patriarchal priesthood yet to be revealed. In fact, it wasn’t until after the dedication of the Kirtland Temple that the keys promised by Elijah, mentioned in what is now Doctrine and Covenants section 2, were finally restored. The Prophet Joseph Smith explains why Elijah was necessary. He said, “Because he holds the keys of the authority to administer in all the ordinances of the Priesthood,”8 or the sealing power. Joseph
also explained that these keys were “the revelation, ordinances, oracles, powers and endowments of the fulness of the Melchizedek Priesthood and of the kingdom of God on the earth.”

Although these keys associated with the patriarchal priesthood had eventually been revealed in 1836, the endowment was not yet given, and the fullness of the priesthood had not yet been restored to the earth. Nearly two years after the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, the Saints left the city and abandoned their temple. Thus, although the temple had been built according to God’s command and the keys had now been received, the power and authority given to the Saints through the ordinances and covenants of the highest order of the Melchizedek Priesthood had not been entered into or received, and thus, in a real sense, “the power of godliness” promised in verse 21 had not yet been “manifest.”

What would be the significance of these ordinances and covenants? What were these keys to do? They would create families and save souls. Who would become a vital part of this divine mandate? Both women and men! President Benson explained, “Even though the Aaronic Priesthood and Melchizedek Priesthood had been restored to the earth, the Lord urged the Saints to build a temple to receive the keys by which this order of priesthood could be administered on the earth again, “for there [was] not a place found on earth that he may come to and restore again that which was lost, . . . even the fulness of the priesthood.”

After the movement of the Saints from Ohio and Missouri to Illinois, Joseph would turn his attention primarily to the building of the new temple. Having now obtained the keys of apostleship given to him by Moses, Elias, and Elijah, Joseph was determined that these keys would be used and the ordinances performed, “for without this, no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live” (Doctrine and Covenants 84:22). This time the temple that the Saints would build would allow for priesthood ordinances not yet available that, unlike the Kirtland Temple and the administrative priesthood functions, would require women. In the Nauvoo Temple, both women and men would enter into a specific order of the priesthood, even the patriarchal order, or fullness of the priesthood, and would receive the promised privileges (Doctrine and Covenants 84:18–22).

Thus the building of the temple in Nauvoo began line upon line. With the building of the temple came new ordinances, new opportunities, and new privileges for women that were unheard of since the days of
earlier dispensations. Regarding the Nauvoo Temple, the Lord revealed to his Prophet in January of 1841, “And verily I say unto you, let this house be built unto my name, that I may reveal mine ordinances therein unto my people; for I deign to reveal unto my church things which have been kept hid from before the foundation of the world, things that pertain to the dispensation of the fulness of times. And I will show unto my servant Joseph all things pertaining to this house, and the priesthood thereof, and the place whereon it shall be built” (Doctrine and Covenants 124:40–42).

In this same revelation, the Lord calls his temple “the house of the daughters of Zion” (Doctrine and Covenants 124:11), perhaps foreshadowing the necessary involvement of women in these sacred priesthood ordinances and its associated power and authority given to women. It wouldn’t be long before women would become full participants in both receiving and performing priesthood ordinances and making covenants in the temple. This background is foundational to correctly teaching the relevance of priesthood to women as revealed in section 84.

Section Heading: Stay Current

As the section heading to section 84 notes, “The Prophet designated it as a revelation on priesthood.” Traditionally, section 84 has been taught and used as training in regard to men and their priesthood ordination. Recently however, great strides have been made by Church leaders to help members understand that “priesthood” applies to women as well as men. Although our perception or understanding is limited, there has always been an inseparable connection (and relevance) between priesthood power and women. Gratefully, prophets continue to give clarification to help us understand the eternal nature of the priesthood and women’s relationship with it.

For example, note the difference in definition of priesthood and therefore the possible relevance to women between the 2010 “Priesthood Principles” introduction found in the official *Handbook 2: Administering in the Church* and that found in the 2020 *General Handbook*. The 2010 *Handbook 2* states, “The priesthood is the power and authority of God. It has always existed and will continue to exist without end. . . . In mortality, the priesthood is the power and authority that God gives to man to act in all things necessary for the salvation of God’s children.” Contrast that definition with the latest 2020 *General Handbook*, which similarly defines priesthood as “the authority and power of God.” It then clarifies, “God grants authority and power to His
sons and daughters on earth to help carry out this work.” When priesthood is defined and applied overtly in the context of both the sisters and brothers, women’s use of the priesthood is better understood. The concept of priesthood power for our women is better understood.

Knowing and following current prophetic teachings will make the priesthood more relevant to women and will help women better understand their ability to call upon God’s priesthood power, as President Nelson invited them to do. Therefore, in teaching our students any topic regarding or related to the priesthood, it is imperative that the most up-to-date and official definitions and teachings are being used.

**Verses 1–6, 17: Focus on Temple and Family Priesthood**

In January 1832, Joseph Smith received a revelation in which the Lord called twenty-four missionaries to serve throughout the United States. Now, nearly nine months later, in September 1832, these missionaries returned home to Kirtland. It was at the meeting that these revelations, now composing section 84, were received by Joseph Smith from the Lord. In fact, section 84 is a compilation of three revelations received from September 22 to September 23, a “season of joy” (section heading).

When put into historical context as described above, it is clear that this revelation was more than an administrative treatise on how the priesthood was to be used and governed in the Church—it was instruction on how the patriarchal priesthood was to be used and entered into in terms of the temple. Therefore, while teaching section 84, it is important to note that the “Holy Priesthood” referred to in verse 6 is being used in terms of “the temple” (verses 3–4), the “house of the Lord” (verse 5), the “temple [to] be reared in this generation” (verse 4) and the patriarchal nature of the priesthood, just as in the days of Moses (verse 6). Like Moses of old, Joseph Smith “sought diligently to sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God.” In both ancient and modern times, sanctification was to be accomplished through the authority and ordinances of the patriarchal, or familial, order of the priesthood, the highest order of the Melchizedek Priesthood, and it was to be done only in the temple. Joseph Smith explained, “The Church is not fully organized, in its proper order, and cannot be, until the Temple is completed.” In other words, the Church could not be fully restored, with all of the rites and privileges granted in the days of Adam through Moses, without a temple on the earth to make that possible.
Referring to the patriarchal order of the priesthood, the Prophet Joseph Smith admonished the Saints, “Go to and Finish the [Nauvoo] temple, and God will fill it with power, and you will then receive more knowledge concerning this Priesthood.” Interestingly, in section 84:19, the Lord promises the “key of the knowledge of God,” which is critical to understanding the priesthood in its fullness. Before the completion of the Nauvoo Temple, Joseph declared that God “has begun to restore the ancient order of His kingdom unto His servants and His people.” In testifying of the fulfillment of the promise given of the Lord, he continued “all things are concurring to bring about the completion of the fullness of the Gospel, a fullness of the dispensation of dispensations, even the fullness of times . . . to prepare the earth for the return of His glory, even a celestial glory, and a kingdom of Priests and kings to God and the Lamb, forever, on Mount Zion.”

It seems that both the Lord and Joseph Smith were anxious to bestow the ordinances and authority of the patriarchal, or familial, order, as described above. On May 4, 1842, the sacred ritual of the temple endowment was initiated as nine men met with the Prophet in the upper room of his store. “In this council,” wrote the prophet, “was instituted the ancient order of things for the first time in these last days,” including “washings, anointings, endowments and the communication of keys pertaining to the Aaronic Priesthood, and so on to the highest order of the Melchizedek Priesthood . . . and all those plans and principles by which anyone is enabled to secure the fullness of those blessings which have been prepared for the Church of the Firstborn, and come up and abide in the presence of the Elohim in the eternal worlds”—thus reversing the consequence of the wickedness during the days of Moses as described in Doctrine and Covenants 84:24.

It wasn’t just to the men, however, that “washings, anointings, endowments and the communication of keys” were to be revealed in the patriarchal order. As part of the preparation for the temple ordinances, Joseph Smith in 1842 organized the Relief Society to serve as a “counterpart and companion to the men’s priesthood quorums,” both essential to the organization of the Church, and both necessary for the salvation of souls. On March 30, 1842, Joseph “instructed members of the newly organized Relief Society regarding their important role in the ‘kingdom of Priests and kings, the ‘holy nation’ which would be established as the Saints were endowed through temple ordinances.” More than half a century later, in 1905, Bathsheba W. Smith, the Relief Society General President who was earlier at the meetings
conducted by Joseph Smith, commented on the Prophet’s instructions to the women: “He said . . . he wanted to make us, as the women were in Paul’s day, ‘A kingdom of priestesses.’ We have the ceremony in our endowments as Joseph taught.” Reynolds Cahoon, an early church leader, connected the purpose of the establishment of the Relief Society with the temple when he declared, “the Order of the Priesthood is not complete without it.”

In September 1843 the first women, all members of the Relief Society, received their endowments. Within the temple, women performed sacred priesthood ordinances as they washed, anointed, and blessed each other, and ministered in the holy endowment. In addition, they entered, with their husbands, into the new and everlasting covenant of marriage, which, explained Elder Kofford, “is simply another way of saying ‘patriarchal order.’”

How is the fullness of the priesthood received in the temple, and what are these associated ordinances that qualify us for eternal life? Elder Bruce R. McConkie taught that “this fulness is received through washings, anointings, solemn assemblies, oracles in holy places, conversations, ordinances, endowments, and sealings. (D&C 124:40.) It is in the temple that we enter into the patriarchal order, the order of priesthood that bears the name ‘the new and everlasting covenant of marriage.’” Therefore, each covenant a woman or man individually makes in the temple is part of the process of entering into the patriarchal, or familial, order, otherwise known as the new and everlasting covenant. Whether married or single, each woman or man therefore individually receives promised priesthood privileges and blessings associated with the patriarchal order of the priesthood, or new and everlasting covenant, and thus “enter[s] into his rest, . . . which rest is the fulness of his glory” (Doctrine and Covenants 84:24).

This patriarchal priesthood is what Joseph was preparing the women and men to receive and enter into in the Nauvoo Temple and seems to be what President Nelson and Church leaders are primarily discussing today. In fact, when President Nelson and other Church leaders refer to women and priesthood, it is almost always in the context of the temple. Note, for example, this quote by President Nelson: “Every woman and every man who makes covenants with God and keeps those covenants, and who participates worthily in priesthood ordinances, has direct access to the power of God. Those who are endowed in the house of the Lord receive a gift of God’s priesthood power by virtue of their covenant, along with a gift of knowledge to know how to draw upon that power.”
This foundational understanding of the endowment of priesthood power and authority to women in the temple is critical to our teaching section 84 in a way that will answer our prophet’s request. It is this patriarchal priesthood, or the fullness of the priesthood, entered into by women and men that allows both to call on priesthood power, as President Nelson has asked. How critical it is for us, as religious educators to explain this, as President Ballard did:

Although the Church plays a pivotal role in proclaiming, announcing, and administering the necessary ordinances of salvation and exaltation, all of that, as important as it is, is really just the scaffolding being used in an infinite and eternal construction project to build, support, and strengthen the family. And just as scaffolding is eventually taken down and put away to reveal the final completed building, so too will the mortal, administrative functions of the Church eventually fade as the eternal family comes fully into view. In that context, it’s important to remember that our Church assignments are only temporary, and that at some point we will all be released either by our leaders or by death. But we will never be released from our eternal callings within the family.26

Imagine how helpful it could be if we as teachers helped our students understand the importance of this revelation in terms of the patriarchal priesthood. How helpful it could be for both women and men to know that they enter into this order of the priesthood in the temple and receive the associated power and authority of the priesthood based upon their obedience to temple covenants. How critical for our sisters and brothers to understand that the priesthood power received through covenants is critical in their lives now, and will remain in the eternities. By focusing on the priesthood in terms of temple and family, we not only help our students understand the relevance of the priesthood to women but also help them better understand how to use its associated power.

Verses 6–18 Include Women Even When Not Specifically Named

Some may wonder how this revelation, and specifically these verses, relate to women, as the verses seem clearly directed to men. In these verses, the Lord is speaking directly to Joseph in the presence of only men, specifically returned missionaries and in the context of missionary work. In regard to the lack of women found in scriptures, President Ballard instructed members to “develop the skill to find [women’s] influence” even when they aren’t specifically mentioned. He continued, “As we look for and find women in our scriptures and in our history, we will see far better the power and influence women have in our family, community, the Church, and the world.”27
Using Section 84 to Emphasize the Priesthood Power of Women

Thus, rather than making this revelation, and specifically verses 6–16 a chain of scriptures referring only to men, how could we accurately include women? Note how seamlessly President Benson included women in the context of these verses:

The order of priesthood spoken of in the scriptures is sometimes referred to as the patriarchal order because it came down from father to son.

But this order is otherwise described in modern revelation as an order of family government where a man and woman enter into a covenant with God—just as did Adam and Eve—to be sealed for eternity, to have posterity, and to do the will and work of God throughout their mortality.²⁸

President Benson naturally included Eve with Adam because Adam and Eve needed each other to enter the patriarchal priesthood in order to have a family. The patriarchal priesthood is all about family.

Robert L. Millet, former dean of Religious Education at Brigham Young University, surmised that the “patriarchal order is a family order, a partnership, a joint stewardship.”²⁹ Imagine then, the strength given to women and the enhancement of their likelihood to understand, use, and call on God’s priesthood power when they correctly see that the priesthood described in this revelation was entered into by both Eve and Adam. Recognizing that Adam and Eve entered into the covenant together and that the patriarchal priesthood is a family order helps women understand their divine role as they make temple covenants. How important is it, then, to help the young women and men understand that women do not need to be ordained to a priesthood office in the administrative function of the Church to enter this order of the priesthood but rather this priesthood power and authority depends on making and keeping temple covenants. Through their covenants with God in the temple, both women and men receive priesthood power and authority, regardless of marital status.

As religious educators, we could help all of our students understand that this patriarchal order of the priesthood was also entered into by Enoch and his wife, who brought their family into the presence of God as the result of making and keeping covenants with the Lord and becoming a Christlike people.³⁰ Noah and Shem followed the same pattern after the Flood, and it continued with Abraham and Sarah, the great patriarch and matriarch. It may be helpful to pause in verses 13 and 14 of section 84 and discuss that it was because of Abraham and Sarah’s righteousness that they, and all covenant-making members of the Church, will receive all of the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant.
Regarding the Abrahamic covenant and the promises of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Elder Bruce R. McConkie also wisely and carefully included women when he taught, “What we say for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob we say also for Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel, the wives who stood at their side and who with them were true and faithful in all things.” He continued, “Men are not saved alone, and women do not gain an eternal fullness except in and through the continuation of the family unit in eternity. Salvation is a family affair.”

As explained in verse 17, this “priesthood continueth in the church of God in all generations, and is without beginning of days or end of years.” This makes complete sense if we understand this priesthood in its true form, in the context of family. Robert Millet instructed, “The patriarchal order was established by God and predates mortal institutions. . . . In the premortal existence—our first estate—we lived under the patriarchal order, the family order. It was an order consisting of Father, Mother, and children, an order presided over by our Parents and directed by love, kindness, gentleness, and godly persuasion. We are thus children of God, members of the royal family. Our souls are eternally attuned and acclimated to family things.”

Perhaps the following quote by Elder James E. Talmage could be used to help our students understand the divine priesthood roles of both women and men in the eternal context of the family: “In the glorified state of the blessed hereafter, husband and wife will administer in their respective stations, seeing and understanding alike, and co-operating to the full in the government of their family kingdom.” He continued with this empowering truth, “Then shall woman reign by Divine right, a queen in the resplendent realm of her glorified state, even as exalted man shall stand, priest and king unto the Most High God. Mortal eye cannot see nor mind comprehend the beauty, glory, and majesty of a righteous woman made perfect in the celestial kingdom of God.”

A statement by President Nelson makes all the more sense by understanding it in an eternal context and tying it to the temple: “When a man understands the majesty and power of a righteous, seeking, endowed Latter-day Saint woman, is it any wonder that he feels like standing when she enters the room?”

What is the promise for those who enter into the patriarchal priesthood and keep the associated covenants? “They shall pass by the angels, and the gods, which are set there, to their exaltation, and glory in all things, as hath been sealed upon their heads, which glory shall be a fulness and a continuation
of the seeds forever and ever. Then shall they be gods, because they have no
eyend; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they
continue; then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto
them. Then shall they be gods, because they have all power, and the angels
are subject unto them” (Doctrine and Covenants 132:19–20). Who are the
“they” referred to in this verse? Men and women who “enter into this order
of the priesthood [meaning the new and everlasting covenant of marriage]
(Doctrine and Covenants 131:2; see also 132:15).

How relevant is the priesthood to women when they understand that
a woman and a man must enter the patriarchal order together to become
gods? How relevant is the priesthood to women when they understand that
both here in mortality and throughout the eternities, both women and men
receive and use priesthood power based on their righteousness to covenants,
especially temple covenants? Women do not need to be included by name in
order for the priesthood to apply to them. If we teach the doctrine correctly
as teachers, we cannot help but make the priesthood relevant to women and
help them understand they have priesthood power through temple covenants.

Verses 19–25: We All (Women and Men) Live Below Our Privileges
and Have Much to Learn

I have come to learn that for many, unless the adult leaders in their lives
understand, support, and teach the truths regarding the priesthood and
women, the women, as well as the men, will likely live below their priesthood
privileges. How critical it is for all parents, teachers, and leaders to correctly
teach truths regarding the role of the priesthood in the lives of women. And
if the women are living below their privileges, so likely are the men. In the
April 2018 general conference, President Nelson “voice[d] a concern,” that
“too many of our brothers and sisters do not fully understand the concept of
priesthood power and authority.” He continued, “I fear that too many of our
brothers and sisters do not grasp the privileges that could be theirs.”53 In the
note to this statement, he specifically cited Doctrine and Covenants 84:18–
22 and 107:18–19.

What are the privileges found in in these verses of section 84 that are not
understood and therefore not likely being used by both women and men? The
Lord explains in verse 19, “This greater priesthood administereth the
gospel and holdeth the key of the mysteries of the kingdom, even the key
of the knowledge of God.” This “greater priesthood” seems to refer to the
patriarchal priesthood, which, as stated previously, operates in the temples of the Lord. Where then do we receive the key of the mysteries of the kingdom, even the key of the knowledge of God? Again, this seems to refer to the temple. What ordinances are being spoken of in verse 20? The ordinances of the temple, where “the power of godliness” are manifest. “For without this,” the Lord continues, “no man can see the face of God, even the Father and live” (verse 22).

Note President Benson’s careful explanation of the patriarchal priesthood and the associated blessings of those who participate in temple ordinances: “This order of priesthood has been on the earth since the beginning, and it is the only means by which we can one day see the face of God and live. (See D&C 84:22.)” He later added, “When you attend the temple and perform the ordinances that pertain to the House of the Lord, certain blessings will come to you.” Among the blessings promised by President Benson are that “you will be endowed with power from on high as the Lord has promised,” and “you will receive the key of the knowledge of God. (See D&C 84:19.) You will learn how you can be like Him. Even the power of godliness will be manifest to you. (See D&C 84:20.)” He continued, “Such are the blessings of the temple and the blessings of frequently attending the temple.”

How important is it for women and men alike to know that through their temple covenants they receive the “key of the knowledge of God”? This key is not to be confused with keys of presidency so often referred to, but rather it is a key made available to all who have made and kept the covenants of the temple. Perhaps this is why President Nelson expressed, “Those who are endowed in the house of the Lord receive a gift of God’s priesthood power by virtue of their covenant, along with a gift of knowledge to know how to draw upon that power.” Key is another name for gift in this context.

President Nelson’s invitation pertained to both men and women needing to deepen their understanding about priesthood power. As religious educators, are we carefully distinguishing between the keys of presidency and the keys made available to all righteous members through their covenants? Do we, as teachers, understand that typically when women and men hear the word key in gospel conversation, they automatically believe it pertains only to men and therefore dismiss the divine privilege of women in this context? Imagine the impact this one clarification alone would make on women’s ability to understand their priesthood power!
Julie B. Beck, former Relief Society General President, wrote, “Through the blessings of the temple, [women] will be armed with power and blessed to receive ‘the key of the knowledge of God.’” She continued, “I am grateful that one of the Lord’s primary purposes in organizing Relief Society was to give the women the responsibility to help each other prepare ‘for the greater blessings of the priesthood found in the ordinances and covenants of the temple.’” How beneficial it could be for women to fully understand that they have a key to the knowledge of God through their temple covenants. In the context of the role of women in moving the work forward and using wisdom in so doing, President Eyring taught, “It was Eve who received the knowledge that Adam needed to partake of the fruit of the tree of knowledge for them to keep all of God’s commandments and to form a family,” and Adam was wise enough to join her.

How important it is to teach that as men and women, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, we are equally capable of receiving knowledge and revelation from the Lord, both for ourselves, our families, and anyone under our stewardship. In fact, the Lord declared in section 76, “I, the Lord, am merciful and gracious unto those who fear me, and delight to honor those who serve me in righteousness and in truth unto the end” (verse 5). What are the privileges and blessings of those who do so? The Lord promises, “To them will I reveal all mysteries, yea, all the hidden mysteries of my kingdom from days of old, and for ages to come, will I make known unto them the good pleasure of my will concerning all things pertaining to my kingdom” (verse 7).

It is through these covenants, made by both women and men, that we are allowed to “see the face of God, even the Father, and live” (Doctrine and Covenants 84:22) or, in other words, return to his presence. President Benson taught, “When our Heavenly Father placed Adam and Eve on this earth, He did so with the purpose in mind of teaching them how to regain His presence.” These covenants, made in the temple through sacred ordinances give both women and men the “key of the knowledge of God,” and the “power of godliness,” which are necessary to return to his presence, to live with and become like our heavenly parents, and to receive their eternal reward.

In addition to these specific privileges of possessing the “key of knowledge,” and receiving the “power of godliness,” which are so often misunderstood by both women and men, it may also be helpful to clarify, as Elder McConkie instructed, “this doctrine of the priesthood—unknown in the world and but little known even in the Church—cannot be learned out of the scriptures
alone. It is not set forth in the sermons and teachings of the prophets and apostles, except in small measure. The doctrine of the priesthood is known only by personal revelation. It comes, line upon line and precept upon precept, by the power of the Holy Ghost to those who love and serve God with all their heart, might, mind and strength.”

Although many talks have been given on subject of priesthood, most are given in the context of the administrative function, and are, as Elder McConkie stated, “in small measure.”

Specifically on the topic of the priesthood, President Russell M. Nelson instructed, “The Lord loves to do His own teaching in His holy house.” He continues, “Imagine how pleased He would be if you asked Him to teach you about priesthood keys, authority, and power as you experience the ordinances of the Melchizedek Priesthood in the holy temple.”

It is helpful for women to know that revelation regarding women and the priesthood is continually being revealed both on an individual and general level, from the newest convert to the prophet, and that we as teachers are in the process of learning ourselves.

I admit that there have been times in my life when I too have found myself wondering what more there is to learn. However, through study, experience, and divine mentoring, I have come to understand that I have barely scraped the surface of what the Lord has to teach in his temples, especially in regard to the priesthood privileges of both women and men. President Packer taught that in the temples, “We are continually instructed and enlightened on matters of spiritual importance. It comes line upon line, precept upon precept, until we gain a fullness of light and knowledge.”

The Lord clearly teaches in section 84 that Moses knew this pattern and that he “plainly taught [this] to the children of Israel in the wilderness, and sought diligently to sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God; but they hardened their hearts and could not endure his presence; therefore, the Lord . . . swore that they should not enter into his rest while in the wilderness” (verses 23–24). “Therefore, he took Moses out of their midst and the Holy Priesthood also” (verse 25). How frustrating and painful this must have been to Moses. Moses knew about this order of the priesthood, as did his wife, because they entered into it themselves. Jethro had entered into it as well, as did Abraham, Noah, Enoch, Adam, and their wives. The people in Moses’s day lost their priesthood privilege. In our day, this privilege is available to all covenant-making Saints but must be clearly understood to fully take advantage of it.
Verses 27–32: Women Receive Priesthood Blessings, Power, and Authority

Although the greater priesthood was taken away, the “lesser priesthood” remained. With this priesthood came the “key of the ministering of angels and the preparatory gospel . . . of repentance and of baptism, and the remission of sins, and the law of carnal commandments” (verses 26–27). This lesser priesthood was that which was bestowed upon John the Baptist, “whom God raised up, being filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother’s womb” (verse 27). How wonderful it is that we have priesthood holders that are authorized to perform the ordinances associated with the Aaronic Priesthood, and how important it is to remind all who participate in these ordinances that they receive the associated blessings.

How can we teach our students the relevance of the Aaronic Priesthood to women? In his October 1998 general conference address, President Dallin H. Oaks explained the connection between the Aaronic Priesthood holder performing the sacrament ordinance and all members receiving the blessings.

Through the Aaronic Priesthood ordinances of baptism and the sacrament, we are cleansed of our sins and promised that if we keep our covenants we will always have His Spirit to be with us. I believe that promise not only refers to the Holy Ghost but also to the ministering of angels, for “angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost; wherefore, they speak the words of Christ” (2 Ne. 32:3). So it is that those who hold the Aaronic Priesthood open the door for all Church members who worthily partake of the sacrament to enjoy the companionship of the Spirit of the Lord and the ministering of angels.

I have read and listened to many talks where young men have been told how significant it is that they have the right to the ministering of angels. Although this is correct, so do the young women! All receive the right to the ministering of angels based upon their ability to make and keep sacred covenants associated with baptism and every other covenant. What an incredible privilege our female students could and should understand. Imagine the blessings a young woman could have as she grows into young adulthood to know that she has the privilege of having angels, seen or unseen, accompany her, know her, and speak to her.

Just as women receive the ministering of angels without being ordained to a priesthood office, women also receive priesthood authority through their callings and priesthood power through their righteousness. President Ballard opened the window to a wider understanding of who has priesthood
authority in the Church. He stated, “Those who have priesthood keys . . . literally make it possible for all who serve faithfully under their direction to exercise priesthood authority and have access to priesthood power.”

In his landmark talk given in the April 2014 general conference, President Oaks illuminated the role of women in regard to priesthood authority in the Church. He declared, “We are not accustomed to speaking of women having
the authority of the priesthood in their Church callings, but what other authority can it be? When a woman—young or old—is set apart to preach the gospel as a full-time missionary, she is given priesthood authority to perform a priesthood function.” He continued, “The same is true when a woman is set apart to function as an officer or teacher in a Church organization under the direction of one who holds the keys of the priesthood. Whoever functions in an office or calling received from one who holds priesthood keys exercises priesthood authority in performing her or his assigned duties.” Priesthood authority is therefore given to both women and men, based on their calling.

Verses 33–42: Teach Truth, Not Tradition

Returning to section 84, the Lord seems to be speaking of the temple when he reminds us that “the sons of Moses and also the sons of Aaron shall offer an acceptable offering and sacrifice in the house of the Lord” (verse 31). In fact, this verse takes us back to the main purpose of this section, which is the house of the Lord. Verses 6–30 seem to be a parenthetical insertion regarding patriarchal priesthood. This then leads us to the oath and covenant of the priesthood found in verses 33–44. Although traditionally taught in terms of those men who have been ordained to a priesthood office in the administrative structure of the Church, the oath and covenant of the priesthood is also relevant to all who have received their endowments. It seems from the context of this revelation and its clear tie to the temple, that the oath and covenant primarily applies to those who have made and kept their temple covenants, including those made in the initiatory and sealing ordinances. How do we become “the seed of Abraham . . . and the elect of God” (verse 34)? Through temple covenants, entered into by both women and men. Who receives “all that my Father hath,” as taught by the Lord in verse 38? Only those who obtain exaltation. Elder Paul B. Pieper of the Quorum of the Seventy clarified, “The full blessings of the priesthood are received together as husband and wife or not at all.” He continued, “It is interesting that in the oath and covenant of the priesthood, the Lord uses the verbs obtain and receive. He does not use the verb ordain. It is in the temple that men and women—together—obtain and receive the blessings and power of both the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods.”

In a 2020 interview between Relief Society General President Jean B. Bingham and President Nelson held in Harmony, Pennsylvania, President
Nelson clarified what the oath and covenant of the priesthood means, and to whom it applies:

President Nelson: “The oath and covenant of the priesthood means that God’s made a promise and He sets the conditions, and if you agree to keep them you make a covenant, and then He also indicates, when you do what I say you will receive the blessings but if you do not what I say you have no promise. So it is clearly a two way conversation, a covenant, two way. He makes the provision and you accept them and keep those covenants and keep the blessings.”

Sister Bingham: “So that is just as relevant to women as it is to men?”

President Nelson: “Totally.”

Sister Bingham: “All those priesthood blessings from the oath and covenant of the priesthood are enjoyed by both men and women.”

President Nelson: “Exactly, exactly.”

Imagine the strength given to covenant-keeping women, young and old, to know that “all that [the] Father hath shall be given unto [them]” (verse 38). Imagine the peace, hope, and joy this statement in and of itself gave to the early pioneer women, who, as they left Nauvoo, looked back at their burning temple with the fire of this covenant burning in their hearts. Clearly, the Lord’s timing is manifest when we realize he had the women receive their temple endowments before crossing the plains. Imagine what a difference it makes for covenant-keeping women in all situations to know that in the future they are promised to receive “all that my Father hath” (verse 38), that God has promised he will “go before your face,” that he “will be on your right hand and on your left,” and that his “Spirit shall be in your hearts” and his “angels round about you, to bear you up” (verse 88).

Can we imagine the strength this truth gives to our single sisters, living away from home, working, in school, on missions, or living in their own homes or apartments with roommates but with no male in the home who has been ordained to a priesthood office? Can we recognize the assurance this may give to a divorced young adult woman or single young adult mother who made and continues to keep sacred temple covenants, or to the children of single mothers or part-member families, likely in our own classrooms? Clearly this priesthood is relevant to them. As President Nelson clarified, “If you are endowed but not currently married to a man who bears the priesthood and someone says to you, ‘I’m sorry you don’t have the priesthood in your home,’ please understand that that statement is incorrect. You may not have a priesthood bearer in your home, but you have received and made sacred covenants
with God in His temple. From those covenants flows an endowment of His priesthood power upon you.”

President Nelson declared, “One day Sister Nelson and I will dwell together in the presence of our family and the Lord forevermore. We will have been faithful to covenants made in the temple and to the oath and covenant of the priesthood, which have assured us, in the words of the Lord, that ‘all that my Father hath shall be given unto [you]’ (D&C 84:38).” That is the promise for the prophet and Sister Nelson, and that is the promise for every faithful woman and man who makes and keeps sacred temple covenants as described in this first revelation of section 84.

Conclusion

Sister Joy D. Jones, former Primary General President, faithfully acknowledged, “I didn’t realize, earlier in my life, that I had access, through my covenants, to the power of the priesthood.” If, as an adult woman, having been active in the Church, and faithfully striving to fulfill her callings in the Church and as a righteous endowed member and mother, the Primary General President didn’t understand that she had access to the power of the priesthood in her life, how much more knowledge and understanding do our students need in regard to women and the priesthood?

What a paradigm shift it would be for all our students to understand that the priesthood really is relevant to women and that women have priesthood power and authority. How important it is for all of us to understand and correctly teach, as did President Nelson, that “all the purposes of the world and all that was in the world would be brought to naught without woman—a keystone in the priesthood arch of creation.”

Notes

3. It is significant to note that section 84 was given by the Lord in three separate revelations. The first revelation, composing what is now verses 1–41 or 42 was received on September 22. The second, verses 41–42 to 102 was received the next day, as well as was the final revelation, composing verses 103 to the end.
29. Robert L. Millet, personal correspondence.
As teachers come to recognize the means by which the Lord speaks to his servants, they can seek for the eyes to see how he is working with and through them to develop their capacity to bless their students.
Uncovering the Voice of the Lord: Analysis and Implications of Joseph Smith’s Letter from Liberty Jail

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Joseph Smith’s experience in Liberty Jail stands among the most faith-challenging, helpless, and discouraging moments of his life. His letters during this time are of such significance that portions have been canonized as scripture and are among the most cited sections by church leaders in general conference.¹ This paper provides an exegesis of portions of Joseph Smith’s Liberty Jail letters with a specific focus on the transition in pronoun usage in his dictation of Doctrine and Covenants 121 and 122. Despite ample scholarly attention on these letters, there appears to be limited discussion regarding Joseph’s change of language in the verses leading from section 121 to 122. It is our position that the use of formal pronouns consistently mirrors voice transitions between Joseph’s voice and the Lord’s. This study expands our understanding of Joseph’s revelatory experience and has implications for the Saints and religious educators. For clarity, we recommend the reader refer to a copy of the Doctrine and Covenants as they read the article.
Context and Background for the Letter and Canonization

Joseph and other close associates were held captive in Liberty Jail from December 1838 to April 1839. In March 1839, more than three months into their confinement and facing a potential death sentence, Joseph dictated two different letters addressed to Bishop Edward Partridge and the Saints. The letters were likely sent together and therefore will be referred to by the designation, “the Liberty letter,” unless specific dating assists with clarity.

Joseph did not claim that his letter from Liberty Jail was revelation as he did with other sections of the Doctrine and Covenants; therefore, the canonization of portions of the letter makes these sections unique. Nearly 60 percent of the Liberty letter was not canonized. An examination of the Liberty letter shows where the canonized portions of the text fall in relation to the other dictated text. The canonized text often omits large segments of the letter and places verses in sequence that were not originally connected. Conversely, the text is separated by the placement of the section 122 heading. Figure 1 illustrates this textual phenomenon and shows how the concluding lines of section 121 and the beginning text of section 122 were originally connected.

This is significant for scriptural understanding. When portions of the letter are placed sequentially and read out of the context of the full letter or divided by section headings (as in Doctrine and Covenants 121:46 and 122:1), the author’s intent may be lost and alternative conclusions could be made. Thus viewing the excerpts in context can enhance understanding, while dividing portions of the letters may cause natural flow and feeling to be lost.

Figure 1. March 22, 1839, letter showing the placement of the section break between Doctrine and Covenants 121 and 122. Joseph Smith Papers Project, © by Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. www.josephsmithpapers.org
Section headings are study helps added to provide background information to assist readers in understanding the “divine revelations and inspired declarations” of the Doctrine and Covenants. In the 1876 edition, Orson Pratt wrote in the heading that section 121 contained, “A Prayer and Prophecies, written by Joseph, the Seer, while in Liberty jail, Clay County, Missouri, March 20, 1839.” The heading for section 121 in each of the 1876, 1981, and 2013 editions retains Pratt’s declaration of the contents. Each edition also includes a heading for section 122, “The word of the Lord to Joseph Smith the Prophet,” again demonstrating reliance on Pratt’s placement and wording of the headings. Since there was no break in the letter where the heading for section 122 was placed, we questioned when and where the section transitioned from “prayer and prophecies of Joseph Smith” for Edward Partridge and the Saints into “the word of the Lord to Joseph Smith,” and whether the letter itself supports Pratt’s suggestion of divine authorship.

The Voice of the Lord or Joseph?

As one might expect in the letter, Joseph’s voice is dominant in the text. He shares his personal revelatory experiences, rails against the injustices inflicted upon the Saints, offers counsel applicable to their circumstances, and relays how they should move forward while he was a prisoner. He regularly speaks in first person informal pronouns (us, we, our) and second person informal pronouns (you, your) as he dictates his message, feelings, and insights to his scribes. However, in portions of the letter the voice of the Lord appears distinct, such as in Doctrine and Covenants 121:7–25, in which the text is addressed to “My son” and formal pronouns are used (thy, thine, thou, thee). Much of the scholarly work on sections 121–23 acknowledges, but does not focus or elaborate on, the change of voice reflected in the text. These transitions from Joseph to the voice of the Lord seem to appear throughout the letter and undergird the assertion that the Lord spoke through Joseph Smith. This will be shown by analyzing Joseph’s use of pronouns, identifying the transitional language used when the Lord speaks, looking for textual markers regarding
whether the transition was recognized, and validating the transition with biblical precedent.

Some may feel that analyzing the text to separate the Lord’s voice from Joseph’s is unnecessary or speculative; however, we propose that Pratt recognized something significant about the portion of the letter that became section 122 when he called it “the word of the Lord to Joseph.” Performing this analysis in no way communicates that portions of these sections are not considered scripture or should in any way be discounted. As in other scriptures, the Lord’s direct voice is significant.

Joseph’s Voice

In this analysis of the Liberty letter, Joseph’s voice must first be recognized. In the original letter Joseph’s voice is prominent in the noncanonized text immediately prior to Doctrine and Covenants 121:34 where he dictates, “We ought at all times to be very careful, that such high mindedness never have place in our hearts.”13 Joseph does not include the Lord in a collective “we,” as a perfect God would not struggle with lack of care or high mindedness. Joseph’s tone remains evident in Doctrine and Covenants 121:34–40, including phrases such as “when we undertake to cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, our vain ambition” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:37; emphasis added throughout), and “we have learned by sad experience” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:39). In these verses, the topic of being called and chosen is demarcated by textual bookends since the question in verse 34, “Why are they not chosen?” is answered when verse 40 concludes with “hence many are called, but few are chosen.”

Joseph’s voice appears to fade in the following portion of the letter contained in section 121:41 through 122:9. In this segment a transition occurs in which second person formal pronouns (thee, thou, thy, and thine) are used. This language continues throughout this portion of the letter. Some have acknowledged the use of second person formal pronouns in section 122, but did not analyze the shift into the use of these pronouns or view the use of formal pronouns in the larger context of the letter.14 Others wrote of the transition between Joseph’s voice and the Lord’s voice from Doctrine and Covenants 121:6 to 121:7 and back to Joseph by 121:26. They also posit that Joseph’s voice continues in verse 43;15 however, they did not analyze the use of formal pronouns in Doctrine and Covenants 121:7–25 or 121:43–45.
Editors of the Joseph Smith Papers Project also noted the multiple shifts in pronoun use when they wrote, “Like the 20 March 1839 epistle, the [22 March 1839] letter shifts between three rhetorical perspectives: the first person plural of all the prisoners, the first person singular of JS, and the voice of Deity directed to JS.” Further, they recognized the transition from Joseph to the voice of Deity, but stated only generally that it occurred rather than identifying where in the text it occurred. They wrote, “The second epistle also contained an extended meditation on the righteous use of priesthood power; during the meditation, the perspective transitioned from the combined voice of JS and his companions addressing a general church audience to the voice of Deity addressing JS with regard to his future influence.” The use of formal pronouns in this section seems to indicate that some transition takes place before section 122.

The Lord’s Voice

Joseph’s voice is heard in Doctrine and Covenants 121:34–40; however, the subsequent verses present a challenge regarding who is speaking. There is a slight subject transition after verse 40, yet verses 41 and 42 have no pronouns and are not definitive on the issue of who is speaking. Scholars have noted the archaic nature of the word betimes (verse 43), used only a handful of times in the King James Version of the Old Testament and never used by Joseph in any other translation or revelation of scripture or speech. Verse 43 is the only instance of the word in scripture revealed through Joseph. Additionally, midsentence, the next second person pronoun in verse 43 is “thou” instead of “you,” further marking a shift into the language of scripture—or as the section heading for 122 notes, into “the word of the Lord to Joseph Smith the Prophet.” These scholars acknowledge that Joseph Smith’s religious language is reminiscent of the King James translation of the Bible but did not address Joseph’s shift into this language by verse 43.

The use of second person formal pronouns in the letter continues until the concluding lines of section 122:9. The
remainder of the extended letter uses second person informal pronouns without exception, which includes the later canonized portion that is now section 123. The text shows a transition point where it appears Joseph’s language changes. Some scholars suggest that “the context of Doctrine and Covenants 121:43 makes it clear that the words are Joseph Smith’s and not the Lord’s.”
Yet noting the shift in pronoun use seems to point to a voice transition from Joseph to the Lord that starts at verse 43 rather than after verse 46 where the section heading was placed.

The only exceptions to formal pronoun usage from section 121:43 through section 122:9 may be quotations. When relating the experience of the son being torn away from his father, the son’s words are given in second person informal pronouns, “My father, my father, why can’t you stay with us? O, my father, what are the men going to do with you?” (Doctrine and Covenants 122:6). This appears related to the experience of Joseph Smith III, who was thrust from his father at sword point prior to Joseph’s incarceration in Liberty Jail. After this brief interruption, the formal pronouns return in verse 7, even in the response from the Father to the son, “Know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good,” until the end of Doctrine and Covenants 122 at verse 9.

The concluding words of section 122:9 include “God shall be with you,” which may be a quotation of Genesis 48:21. This scripture contains the patriarch Jacob’s dying words to his son Joseph, who was previously sold into Egypt by his traitorous brothers and had experienced unjust imprisonment (see Genesis 37–39). Only five words from Genesis match Doctrine and Covenants 122:9, but they are exact in word choice and sequence. Two other references in the Old Testament contain variations of the sentiment “God shall be with you,” though with slightly different wording and with less significant context. This may suggest that Genesis 48 was either a recent reading of the prisoners or a divine reminder of a similar Joseph who experienced similar circumstances. This reminder of the ancient Joseph’s father is a fitting conclusion to this portion of the letter that records words from a father to his son.

*Noticed or Unnoticed?*

The shift in language calls into question whether Joseph noticed and was aware of the language change. A comparison to a seemingly similar phenomenon in the beginning of the letter is revealing. When sharing his frustration and pleading with the Lord, Joseph used formal language indicating that he was speaking to Deity in prayer (Doctrine and Covenants 121:1–6). Prior to receiving an answer from the Lord (starting in 121:7), there was a lengthy interlude in the letter addressed to “Dearly and beloved Brethren.” This interlude is void of the formality of Joseph’s prayer to God and indicates the
prisoners were languishing in fettered frustration until they received letters from Emma Smith, Don Carlos Smith, and Bishop Edward Partridge. Joseph described the impact of the letters as “breathing a kind and consoling spirit we were much gratified with there contents,” and “they were to our soles as the gentle air, refreshing but our joy was mingled with grief because of the suffering of the poor and much injured saints.”

He then provided this interesting textual marker to indicate he recognized inspiration in this moment of combined comfort and grief: “and when the heart is sufficiently contrite and the voice of inspiration steals along and whispers my son peace be unto thy soul.” This earlier revelatory experience was obvious to Joseph, and his letter shared what the voice of inspiration had whispered to him in his affliction, now recorded as section 121:7–25.

This revelatory moment shows that for portions of his answer, Joseph noticed the shift from his own thoughts to the voice of the Lord, which he recorded to the recipients. This appears intentional and appears to be the word of the Lord to him since he noted his heart had to be sufficiently contrite to receive it. Second person formal pronouns were used in verses 7–11. Verses 12–25 do not contain second person formal pronouns because the Lord transitioned to third person while speaking about those working against the Saints. However, this portion is unique since it contains the declaratory statements “saith the Lord” multiple times throughout, demonstrating that in this moment Joseph recognized divine authorship.

At the end of what is now section 121, Joseph gives no indication he is speaking in the name of the Lord as he had done in the March 20 letter (Doctrine and Covenants 121:7–25). Neither is there direct language revealing this was a prompting, impression, or whisper of the Spirit, as had been indicated earlier. Though no change of scribe occurred in the final version of the letter, it is not known whether there was a change of scribe or pause in the dictation in the original draft that may have caused him to alter pronoun use as he resumed dictation. Regardless, the final draft preserved the change in pronouns.

Of note are two edits to the pronouns on page 4 of the March 22 letter (Doctrine and Covenants 122:7 and 9). In verse 7, “thee” was inserted between “open the mouth wide after” and “know thou.” This could be accounted for as a scribal omission from transcribing the rough draft to the final draft, or a scribal addition as the final draft was reviewed and the pronoun needed. Either way, it demonstrates a deliberate use of a second person
formal pronoun in this portion of the letter. In the edit of Doctrine and Covenants 122:9, the scribe originally wrote “thee days” but the double e’s were written over with a y to become “thy days.” Again, the use of a second person formal pronoun was preserved in the editing process.

This analysis appears to support Pratt’s assertion that the words are the Lord’s, makes the transition from Joseph’s words to the Lord’s words more distinct, identifies consistency in the Lord’s tone in the Liberty letter, and may aid the reader in recognizing the Lord’s words in Joseph’s writings. The analysis also clarifies an alternative break between the topics of sections 121 and 122, supporting what has been described as “one continuous thought.”

**Biblical Precedent**

There is biblical precedent for this vacillation between personal voice and inspired voice. One example is Paul’s letter to the Corinthians in the New Testament. Paul left textual markers indicating when he spoke his own counsel versus when he spoke with the authority of his calling. For example, in 1 Corinthians 7:6 Paul stated, “But I speak this by permission, and not of commandment.” A few verses later he noted, “And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord” (7:10), indicating that the commandment he taught next carried the full weight of the divine. Again, Paul later reverted to “now concerning virgins I have no commandment of the Lord: yet I give my judgment, as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful” (7:25). He concluded this section about marital relationships with some ambiguity on the subject of authority when he wrote, “But she is happier if she so abide, after my judgment: and I think also that I have the Spirit of God” (7:40). In the Liberty letter Joseph follows this same pattern of addressing the concerns of the Saints in his own voice and sometimes adding the authority of heaven to the situation.

**Intent, Audience, and Interpretation**

The results of this analysis carry implications regarding the intent, audience, and alternative interpretations of the text. Some of these implications support the conclusions of the scholars cited, while others suggest alternative conclusions.

Some suggest the “interesting possibility” that the message in Doctrine and Covenants 121:45–122:7 is intended for Edward Partridge and the Saints. If so, it demonstrates the care, sorrow, and pleading of a prophet for
the Saints. It is a precedent for what Russell M. Nelson, current president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, described concerning the aftermath of a 2015 Church policy regarding children of LGBT parents: “The First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve have continued to seek the Lord’s guidance and to plead with Him in behalf of His children who were affected by the 2015 policy. We knew that this policy created concern and confusion for some and heartache for others. That grieved us. Whenever the sons and daughters of God weep—for whatever reasons—we weep. So our supplications to the Lord continued.”

Prophets experience sorrow and concern as the Saints experience trials and hardship. This sorrow may be general or intensely personal. Is there a specific message of comfort from Joseph Smith for his son Joseph Smith III in the words “know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good” ( Doctrine and Covenants 122:7)? If the phrase “my son” is in answer to the child’s plea “my Father” in Doctrine and Covenants 122:6, then it may be Joseph reassuring his own son of these things. While this personal application could be especially meaningful for Joseph’s immediate family, it seems less likely (as a specific intention) than a more general application since the “if thou” statements begin in verse 5 and seem to apply to a wider audience.

To expand this application even further, if it is the Lord’s voice in this portion of the letter, instead of Joseph’s, other insights emerge. It may be that Joseph related his counsel and understanding of the righteous exercise of priesthood authority in Doctrine and Covenants 121:34–40, and then the Lord added instructions and promises from heaven in 121:41–122:4. If so, then the promises in Doctrine and Covenants 122:1–4 are attached to the principles in 121:41–46 and are thereby the words of the Lord to all of his Saints—not only to Joseph Smith. All holders of priesthood authority need these instructions so that “thy people shall never be turned against thee by the testimony of traitors” (122:3).

This application makes the contents more of a direct promise to all, like the oath and covenant of the priesthood in section 84, instead of an indirect promise tied to a specific person and likened to other believers. This also mirrors a pattern throughout Joseph’s ministry as he sought to expand his personal experiences with God to everyone, demonstrated by teachings such as the temple endowment for men and women and having one’s calling and election made sure. In this interpretation, the Lord’s care for his people
becomes clear and provides comfort. There is some indication that Doctrine and Covenants 122:4–9 is an elaboration of the answer Joseph received in 121:7–25. Both passages are addressed to “my son” (121:7 and 122:9), both discuss the suffering of the Saints lasting “a small moment” (121:7 and 122:4), and both confirm that the sufferers are not alone, having both friends and God who still “stand by thee” (121:10 and 122:4). Additionally, Joseph’s use of cosmic imagery in 121:4 (e.g., heaven, earth, seas, the devil, Sheol) to call down God’s power over all creation to avenge the Saints is reprised in 122:7 but in a significantly different way. Instead of God asserting his power over the cosmos to afflict their enemies (as Joseph requested), the message of this verse is that even if all those elements come against the Saints, it is for their experience and good. Jesus submitted himself beneath them all, and the Saints are not greater than he.

These parallels support Pratt’s section heading that these are the words of the Lord. This also supports a connection between the suffering of Joseph, the Saints, and the Savior. Just as Joseph prayed for an end of the suffering, so did Jesus, even three times (Matthew 26:39–44). Joseph was weighed down by the suffering of the Saints and even faced death. In his personal suffering, Jesus was also “sore amazed, and . . . very heavy” (Mark 14:33); his soul felt sorrow even unto death (see Mark 14:34). While Joseph described the letters from his friends and family as “breathing a kind and consoling spirit,” God also sent “an angel unto [Jesus] from heaven, strengthening him” (Luke 22:43). The Saints were set upon by a mob, betrayed by people once counted among them. Similarly, Jesus was betrayed by one closest to him who brought a mob against him (John 18:2–3). Joseph sought the Lord with the words, “Where art thou?” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:1), and Jesus cried from the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). The parallels between the suffering of the Son and the sufferings of the Saints are an indication that they had truly taken up the cross in their efforts to follow him. Even still, “The Son of Man hath descended below them all” (Doctrine and Covenants 122:8).

Implications for the Saints

To apply God’s reminder of his Son in these moments of deepest despair, a suffering Saint may observe and do what Jesus did in his darkest hour. Several examples from the New Testament are offered here, although many additional examples are available throughout the scriptures.
When Jesus’s prayers for the suffering in Gethsemane to end seemed immediately unanswered, he intoned, “Nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matthew 26:39). When the weight seemed unbearable and caused him to fall on the ground, he continued to pray and to invite his friends (perhaps ministering brothers or sisters today) to “watch ye and pray” (see Mark 14:32, 38). When he was in agony even after the angel’s strengthening appearance, “He prayed more earnestly” (Luke 22:44). When he was betrayed and surrounded by a mob, he stood before them, submitted himself to them, and requested reprieve for those who were with him (John 18:4–8). Perhaps God responded to Jesus, who felt forsaken, with words similar to “know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good” (Doctrine and Covenants 122:7).

Alma prophesied of the Lord’s experience and resultant good when he said, “He will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:12). The experience the Lord gained was (or is) contained in our experiences. The good that came from his suffering is our access to his comfort and consolation. Joseph pled for divine intervention so that “thy servants will rejoice in thy name forever” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:6). Ammon observed, “Behold, how many thousands of our brethren has he loosed from the pains of hell; and they are brought to sing redeeming love, and this because of the power of his word which is in us, therefore have we not great reason to rejoice? Yea, we have reason to praise him forever, for he is the Most High God, and has loosed our brethren from the chains of hell” (Alma 26:13–14).

Implications for Religious Educators

The additional understanding resulting from Joseph’s revelatory experience in Liberty Jail has implications for gospel instructors. Some of these are explored below to highlight principles that will bless teachers and students.

**Representing the Savior**

This change of voice may indicate that these words are not Joseph’s but that he is representing the Lord to the Saints. He was the Lord’s representative both by ordination and by speaking under the direction and inspiration of heaven. Whether teachers are called by local priesthood leaders or approved
by the Church Board of Education, they seek to live, teach, and administer like the Savior and do so when they yield to his influence. Though the classroom situations may vary and student receptibility changes, when speaking under the direction of heaven, teachers represent Jesus Christ and speak the words he would utter if present. Joseph’s experience and that of modern teachers can be an attestation of President Boyd K. Packer’s statement, “I believe that to the degree you perform, according to the challenge and charge which you have, the image of Christ does become engraved upon your countenances. And for all practical purposes, in that classroom at that time and in that expression and with that inspiration, you are He and He is you.”

Conduit of Revelation

This study suggests that Joseph was a conduit of revelation consciously and perhaps at other times subconsciously. Some revelatory experiences are obvious and powerful, while others can be subtle and may even come without recognition. The transition in Joseph’s language may be a model for teachers and students of what Elder Neal A. Maxwell referred to as “quiet moments of spiritual significance.” The Spirit can work through gospel teachers as they act on promptings, pause for moments of deeper spiritual reflection, ask inspired questions, and invite students to act, listen, share experiences, observe, and testify. As part of being a conduit, teachers have the opportunity to help students learn the process of deepening their spiritual understanding and recognize when they are “moved upon by the Holy Ghost” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:43). Joseph described revelation when he stated, “A person may profit by noticing the first intimation of the spirit of revelation; for instance, when you feel pure intelligence flowing into you, it may give you sudden strokes of ideas... and thus by learning the Spirit of God and understanding it, you may grow into the principle of revelation, until you become perfect in Christ Jesus.”

Edification for Teacher and Student

Revelation promotes deeper spiritual understanding and can happen for both teachers and students. Both Joseph and the Saints had the opportunity to be edified by what the Lord taught Joseph: (1) to love those he had to rebuke (Doctrine and Covenants 121:43), (2) to show charity for all men (121:45), (3) to be confident in the presence of God (121:45), (4) to have the Holy
Ghost as his “constant companion” (121:46), (5) to understand the eternal nature of God’s support (122:4), (6) to know that all experiences would “be for [his] good” (122:7), (7) to learn about the depth of the Savior’s condescension (122:8), and (8) to be promised that he would be preserved until he finished his work (122:9). Gospel instructors can also receive counsel, have their spiritual needs met, and experience the Savior’s promised edification in the process of classroom instruction (see Doctrine and Covenants 50:17–24). President Marion G. Romney said, “I always know when I am speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost because I always learn something from what I’ve said.”

Conclusion

Identifying the Lord’s words in the consistent use of formal pronouns in this letter expands our understanding of his compassion, lovingkindness, and guidance while also providing additional depth to the messages of his prophet. As teachers come to recognize the means by which the Lord speaks to his servants, they can seek for the eyes to see how he is working with and through them to develop their capacity to bless their students. Years before his incarceration in Liberty Jail, Joseph dictated the words of the Lord in the statement, “Draw near unto me and I will draw near unto you” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:63). These words were fulfilled with divine eloquence in a dingy dungeon and continue to be fulfilled in the refining fires that sanctify his people. Just as Paul once wrote to the Saints using his judgment to draw them to God, so did Joseph Smith—and we think also that he had the Spirit of God.

Notes

1. Stephen W. Liddle and Richard C. Galbraith, “Scripture Citation Index,” https://scriptures.byu.edu/#12e::c12e. The following sections of the Doctrine and Covenants are among the most cited. The number of citations follows the section number: section 121 (846), 122 (159), and 123 (104) for a combined total of 1,109 citations.

2. Justin R. Bray, “Within the Walls of Liberty Jail,” in Revelations in Context, ed. Matthew McBride and James Goldberg (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), 256.

4. For a comprehensive treatment of the canonization of sections 121–23, see Kathleen Flake, “Joseph Smith’s Letter from Liberty Jail: A Study in Canonization,” Journal of Religion 92, no. 4 (October 2012): 515–26. The Liberty letter resembles a biblical pattern of canonization. Not only did the text of the letter resemble the writings of Paul, but the process of canonization did as well. A letter authored by one with apostolic authority to distant saints, containing earthly and heavenly counsel that would later be elevated to scripture, could apply as readily to this letter as to many of the Pauline epistles. See also Bray, “Within the Walls of Liberty Jail,” 260; and Wessel, “Textual Context,” 104.


6. For example, in the original letter more than three handwritten pages appear between Doctrine and Covenants 121:6 and 121:7, and more than three pages appear between 121:25 and 121:26.

7. The following verses appear sequentially in the canonized text; however, there were often significant portions of text between verses in the original letter: Doctrine and Covenants 121:6–7, 25–26, 32–33, 33–34; and 122:9–123:1.

8. Wessel, “Textual Context,” 105. Wessel discussed the proximity of the prophet’s plea and the Lord’s response. An erroneous conclusion due to proximity of current text could be that the Lord’s response was instantaneous. Current text fails to capture that the Lord delivered peace through the letters of Emma Smith and others.


10. “Introduction,” in Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013), v.

11. Section 121 heading, in the Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1876), 383.

12. Section 122 heading, Doctrine and Covenants (1876 ed.), 388.


17. Historical Introduction to Letter, March 22, 1839, JSP.


23. There are similarities in the KJV phrases from Exodus 18:19, “God shall be with thee,” and from Amos 5:14, “and so the Lord, the God of hosts, shall be with you.” The
reference in Amos is not a strong match given the different title for God, the way the punctuation breaks up the phrase, and the context of the chapter that has little to do with Smith’s circumstance in Liberty Jail, though verse 15 states “the Lord God of hosts will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph.” The phrasing in the verse from Exodus is closer but ironically ends with a second person formal pronoun instead of the second person informal pronoun used in Genesis 48:21. The context of Exodus is Jethro recommending that Moses establish lower judges to assist with the affairs of the Israelites. This is not as close of a match as the context in Genesis 48.

24. There is precedent for a link between Joseph Smith Jr. and Joseph who was sold into Egypt in 2 Nephi 3.


29. See Doctrine and Covenants 121:17–25, especially verses 7–10, 16, 23.

30. Historical Introduction to Letter, 22 March 1839, JSP. The editors note that the rough draft is extant; however, only the fair copy is currently published.


36. Letter, 20 March 1839, JSP, 16, “We shall continue to offer further reflections in our next epistle.” This answer is also referenced in the Historical Introduction to Letter, 22 March 1839, JSP.


38. Saints, 346.


42. Kim B. Clark, “Apply Your Hearts to Understanding” (Evening with a General Authority Broadcast, February 8, 2019.)

43. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 132.

“Come, See the Place”:  
Teaching Students the  
Value of Historic Sites

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The scriptures repeatedly speak of holy places. For example, the Old Testament frequently uses the term to refer to the tabernacle or later the temple, including designating a portion of both structures as “the holy place” and “the most holy place” (see Exodus 26:33–34; 1 Kings 6:16; Ezekiel 41:4). New Testament passages generally adopt the same usage, with the book of Acts twice recording when Jewish leaders accused Stephen and later Paul of corrupting the “holy place” by their teaching about Jesus of Nazareth (see Acts 6:13; 21:28). Foretelling when “the end [would] come,” the Savior himself cautioned followers in his Olivet discourse to “stand in the holy place” (Matthew 24:14–15).

Beyond temples, examples abound in scripture of places where memorials were raised to commemorate the location of significant events. For example, after crossing the River Jordan into the promised land, the Lord instructed Joshua to take from the river “out of the place where the priests’ feet stood firm” twelve stones to create “a memorial unto the children of Israel for ever” (Joshua 4:3, 7; see also Joshua 24:26). Similarly, Samuel raised a stone to commemorate God’s help in delivering his people from the Philistines (1 Samuel
Furthermore, the Book of Mormon speaks of the Waters of Mormon and even “the place of Mormon” as “beautiful . . . to the eyes of them who there came to the knowledge of their Redeemer” (Mosiah 18:30). In our day, as a part of the gathering of Israel (Doctrine and Covenants 101:64), the Lord has repeated the injunction to “stand in holy places,” making the term “places” plural in each instance (see Doctrine and Covenants 45:32; 87:8; 101:22, 64; 124:39). Accordingly, modern prophets have clarified that our temples, our meetinghouses, our homes, and even our bodies are among the places that we should make and preserve as “holy.”

While members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints may readily think of dedicated places of worship as holy, we can benefit from expanding our vision to include sacred sites of the Restoration as holy places as well. Including historic sites alongside temples, chapels, and homes, Elder Dennis B. Neuenschwander taught, “Holy places have always been essential to the proper worship of God. For Latter-day Saints, such holy places include venues of historic significance, our homes, sacrament meetings, and temples. Much of what we reverence, and what we teach our children to reverence as holy and sacred, is reflected in these places.” Over the years, Church historical sites have been integrated into the hierarchy of sacred places within the Church. Michael Madsen suggests that these sites have undergone what he refers to as “sanctification,” referring to the increasing interest in and importance of these sites in both Church history and collective consciousness. These locations “serve as reminders of God’s hand in guiding the Church to its present state.”

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how Church historical sites can be integrated into gospel teaching. After discussing religious pilgrimage and sacred space, the paper focuses on Church practices relating to the development of historic sites and how teachers can help students learn from and appreciate historic space.

Religious Pilgrimage and Sacred Space

The act of visiting a holy place for a religious or spiritual purpose is as old as humanity itself. Every year, millions of people engage in pilgrimage travel to “journey to a distant sacred goal.” The United Nations World Tourism Organization suggests that religious sites of all faith traditions receive between 300 and 600 million visitors annually. Indeed, some of the world’s largest gatherings are religious in nature, such as the Kumbh Mela pilgrimage in India, where 120 million people participate in bathing rituals along
the Ganges River, and the Aberdeen pilgrimage in Iran, which averages 20 million participants. Pilgrimage as a formal religious ritual exists in many of the world’s major religions, including Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism among others. In Islam, participation in the Hajj at least once in a lifetime is a requirement of all able-bodied Muslims, while Roman Catholics are strongly encouraged to frequent religious shrines and other sites for penance, healing, initiatory, and other religiously motivated purposes. Buddhists visit sites related to the life and teachings of the Buddha as well as other notable Buddhists, and while not formally required in Hinduism, Hindus travel along various pilgrimage circuits to sacred sites for spiritual purposes and to strengthen collective cultural and religious identities.

While advances in transportation, information, and communication technologies have led to an increase in people who travel to religious sites, the idea of what types of journeys constitute a pilgrimage has also expanded to include any journey “undertaken by a person in quest of a place or a state that he or she believes to embody a valued ideal.” As such, some might consider trips to sites of civic religion in Washington, DC, visits to war memorials, or even attending sporting events a pilgrimage if the person deems the trip as such. However, this metaphorical expansion and watering down of the term does not take away from the fact that the etymology of pilgrimage is religious in nature, and that pilgrimage is a centuries-old act of people in search of meaning and religious and spiritual fulfillment in their lives.

In The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, there is no formal theology of pilgrimage where Church members are required to travel for religious purposes, with the exception of visiting temples to perform their own endowments and to help redeem the dead. Members are not promised salvific rewards for pilgrimage, nor are religious visits to historic sites an expectation or pillar of belief. As Elder Bruce R. McConkie once wrote, “Neither shrines nor pilgrimages are a part of true worship as practiced by the true Saints. . . . There is no thought that some special virtue will attach to worship by performing [pilgrimage to sacred sites].”

However, interest in and support for preserving Church history is strongly rooted in Latter-day Saint beliefs and practices. For the Church and its members, Professor Sara M. Patterson concludes that “place, material objects, and theological claims . . . [are] inextricably tied to one another.” Indeed, “it is . . . through history-telling that Latter-day Saints often communicate their theological claims.” As historians Douglas F. Tobler and S. George Ellsworth note, “History plays a vital role in [Latter-day Saint] thought, where it joins
with theology and practical religion to answer many of life’s questions and to make daily life meaningful, intelligible, and worthwhile.”

The beliefs of the Church are entwined with the veracity of its founding historical events. As a result, every year thousands of Church members visit historical sites related to the Restoration, take cruises to possible Book of Mormon lands, book tours to visit the Holy Land, participate in or watch Church pageants, and perform pioneer treks. As such, Church members engage in what Daniel Olsen has called “informal pilgrimages,” where they engage in religiously motivated or “pilgrimage-like” travel for educational, spiritual, and identity- and faith-building purposes.

While some pilgrims engage in the act of pilgrimage with no predetermined endpoint, most pilgrims travel with a specific sacred endpoint or place in mind. These sacred spaces and places revolve around what is referred to as “poetic” or “substantive” sacred space as promoted by Mircea Eliade, in which it is an “ontological given” that the “divine” or the “holy” has irrupted in that location. It is in these spaces where people can potentially encounter or enter into the presence of divinity. As such, many religious groups, both past and present, build religious edifices over these spaces to maintain their sanctity in the face of a secularizing and profane world.

In his book Why Old Places Matter, Thompson Mayes forwards several arguments for the preservation and development of historic sites. These include their abilities to facilitate continuity, create identity, engender learning, and foster community. Mayes argue that “These places spur our memory, delight us with beauty, help us understand others, give us a deep sense of belonging, and, perhaps most fundamentally, remind us who we are. . . . Old places are important for people to define who they are through memory, continuity, and identity.” Stephanie Meeks, former president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, suggested, “Old places . . . [bring] to life, across millennia, the long continuity of the past. . . . They give us the chance to feel a connection to the broad community of human experience, a community that exists across time. . . . Historic places connect us to the striving and struggles of earlier generations and of generations to come. They tell us who we are. And they help us understand that, though we ourselves may be mortal, our actions will echo on after we are gone, just as those of previous generations inform our world today.”

As noted, there are many places such as our homes and temples where the Spirit of the Lord resides and thus are considered holy or sacred by Latter-day Saints. Church historical sites are also holy sites in the sense that they
represent and embody examples of instances where God played either a direct (e.g., the Sacred Grove) or indirect (e.g., sites of revelation) role in the establishment and development of the Church in the last days. As such, Church historical sites are places that serve as tangible reminders of the divine nature of the Restoration. Indeed, as Steven Olsen has pointed out, even if no one came to visit these historical sites, the Church would be obligated to mark and manage these sites because of the covenants Church members make each week to serve as “witnesses” and to “remember Him.” Therefore, Latter-day Saints take the view of sacred space seriously—the idea that God does manifest himself either in person or through the Holy Ghost in particular spaces and places.

Preserving and Developing Latter-day Saint Historic Sites

Interest in and visits to sites important to Latter-day Saint history developed early in the Restoration. While there were no official memorials in a formal sense during the first generation of the Church, there was lingering awareness of the sites sacred to the Restoration story. For example, both the believing and the curious continued to be attracted to western New York’s Hill Cumorah, of which William W. Phelps wrote from Kirtland in 1835, “Cumorah . . . is well calculated to stand in this generation, as a monument of marvelous works and wonders.” Likewise, Church members, including missionaries traveling throughout the eastern United States, repeatedly stopped to visit the Kirtland Temple, where a congregation continued to meet following the Church’s relocation to Missouri and later Illinois. Similarly, after the deaths of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, Carthage Jail achieved significant notoriety. For example, in 1845 a party of as many as fifty prominent leaders and members including Apostles Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, Parley P. Pratt, and George A. Smith visited the jail, where they listened as John Taylor and Willard Richards recounted details of the Martyrdom. Interested in historical artifacts from the tragedy, the group reported that “the blood of Hyrum still stained the floor where he fell and breathed his last; the walls were marked with bullet holes.”

Relocation of the Church to Salt Lake City prevented many early Latter-day Saints from readily visiting historic sites across New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. Leaving the City of Joseph on May 22, 1846, Wilford Woodruff recorded in his journal, “I left Nauvoo for the last time perhaps in this life. I looked upon the Temple & City of Nauvoo as I retired from it & felt to ask the Lord to preserve it as a monument of the sacrifice of
his Saints.” However, like the children of Israel by the rivers of Babylon who “remembered Zion” (Psalm 137:1), Latter-day Saint memories were continually drawn to their former homes, and visitors continued to frequent historic sites across the nineteenth century as circumstances allowed. Famously, Church history missionaries Andrew Jenson, Edward Stevenson, and Joseph S. Black conducted a five-week fact-finding tour of historic sites across Missouri, Illinois, New York, Ohio, and Iowa in the fall of 1888, delighting newspaper readers in Utah with their descriptions. Furthermore, in theological language stronger than merely the foreshadowing of family vacations, Church President John Taylor boldly predicted a dramatic repossession of the Church’s abandoned historic sites:

As a people or community, we can abide our time, but I will say to you Latter-day Saints, that there is nothing of which you have been despoiled by oppressive acts or mobocratic rule, but that you will again possess, or your children after you. Your rights in Ohio, your rights in Jackson, Clay, Caldwell and Davies [Daviess] counties in Missouri, will yet be restored to you. Your possessions, of which you have been fraudulently despoiled in Missouri and Illinois, you will again possess, and that without force, or fraud or violence. The Lord has a way of His own in regulating such matters.

The twentieth century brought the fulfillment of President Taylor’s words. The end of the practice of plural marriage, coupled with decreased regional isolation, opened the door to reshape the Church’s relationship with the outside world. As historian Kathleen Flake summarized, “Desiring a better forum for the church’s message, Joseph F. Smith was committed to doing what was necessary to heal the breach between his people and the rest of America. He wanted to end Mormonism’s Rocky Mountain isolation.” In addition, the commemoration of Church history was centered on living pioneers, not places. However, as the original pioneer generation passed on, there was a need to replace this “living history.” One way the Church did this was through the acquisition and development of historic sites, which “signaled the church’s intent to come out from behind its mountain barrier and claim a place in America at large.” Through its historic sites, the Church created “a new future out of the Mormon past.”

The first foray into historical site acquisition was the purchase of the Mount Pisgah burial site in central Iowa in the mid-1880s, followed by the placement of an obelisk on the property in 1888. Fifteen years later, Church President Joseph F. Smith authorized the purchase of the first historic structure, the Carthage Jail, in 1903. Subsequent acquisitions soon followed, including a portion of the temple lot in Independence, Missouri (1904), the...
Joseph Smith birthplace in Sharon, Vermont (1905), the Smith Farm and the Sacred Grove in Palmyra, New York (1907), and the Far West, Missouri, temple site (1909). Frequently with the assistance and mediation of generous benefactors, ensuing decades brought other sites under Church ownership, including the Hill Cumorah (1923–28), Whitmer Farm (1926), Nauvoo Temple Lot (1937–62), Liberty Jail (1939), Adam-ondi-Ahman (1944), Isaac Hale and Joseph Smith lots in Harmony (1946–48), John Johnson Home (1956), Newel K. Whitney Store (1965), Grandin Print Building (1978), and Winter Quarters Cemetery (1999). In Nauvoo itself, officials conducted numerous transactions to acquire historic structures across several decades, including, among others, the John Taylor Home and Times and Seasons building (1938), Heber C. Kimball Home (1954), Masonic Hall (1967), Wilford Woodruff Home (1970), Brigham Young Home (1973), Browning Gunsmith Shop (1973), and pioneer burial ground (1989). More recently, in 2012 the Church acquired Hawn’s Mill, Far West burial ground, and Smith homes in Kirtland.

Purchasing these sites was one thing, but developing them and attracting visitors was another. Jennifer Lund, director of the Historic Sites Division of the Church History Department, noted that “during this initial era of historic site ownership, the Church rented the sites primarily to non–Latter-day Saint
tenants who gave occasional tours or at least tolerated visitors.” Exceptions to this included the Joseph Smith Birthplace and Temple Square, where formal site programs were developed. With these sites owned by the Church, visitors steadily increased, including several prominent visits by Church leaders and groups. Eventually, site interpretation by tenants and later formally called missionaries took over most locations. “While the primary rationale for these sites looked outward” to non-members, Lund observed, “there was also an imperative to teach the membership as well.” Lund also noted the dual charge outlined by President John R. Winder, who in 1904 proposed a monument to Joseph and Hyrum Smith on Salt Lake’s Temple Square. Winder declared, “I would like to see something erected to these martyrs that would be an object lesson to our children and our children’s children throughout all generations, and also to the thousands of people who visit us.”

Members visit these historic sites for a variety of reasons. A sampling of entries from the 1940 “Register of Visitors to ‘Old’ Carthage Jail” captures this diversity: “A wonderful place,” wrote one Illinois resident; “A Dream Come True!,” exclaimed a man from California; “Another Calvary,” remarked a gentleman from Minneapolis; and “Wonderfully sacred sanctuary,” commented Relief Society General President Amy Brown Lyman. “For Latter-day Saints,” Lund stressed, “visits to locations associated with the events of the Restoration were not solely motivated by curiosity; rather, they were religious pilgrimages wherein the faithful sought to experience firsthand the places of sacred events.” As Richard Jackson observed, “Church members commonly visit these sites as tourists and, in the process, gain greater personal understanding of the history of the Church and its beliefs.” Michael MacKay suggested that Church members “today study the history [of] and visit the Restoration sites, which enable individual members to envision their sacred history within the geography where the events took place, as if they had found the Church’s Garden of Eden.”

Helping Students Appreciate Sacred Space
With a better understanding of pilgrimage and sacred space in Latter-day Saint tradition, along with a more nuanced understanding of the history of the acquisition and development of Latter-day Saint historic sites, how can gospel teachers help students benefit from an understanding of places in Church history? This section will examine ways in which a familiarity with sacred space can help build student testimonies as well as provide practical ideas for how teachers can integrate church historic sites into their classes.
Connecting to the Past Creates Confidence in Sharing Church History

For some students, it is a challenge to recall and share the myriad of details of Church history that they learn. In the Doctrine and Covenants alone, there are more than one hundred characters named in the text as well as dozens of places. While the chronological order of the revelations generally keeps the sections geographically connected, the travels of Joseph Smith to various locations in New York, Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and Upper Canada also cause the revelations to occasionally jump from place to place. As such, students, especially those who are spatial or visual learners, may benefit from knowing the major events and an approximate period for each prominent historic site.\(^{54}\) “Places serve as mnemonic aids,” Thompson Mayes concludes. “They remind us of our memories, both individual . . . and collective. . . . They also spur people to investigate broader societal memories they don’t yet fully know.”\(^{55}\)

President Spencer W. Kimball challenged students to do the hard work of learning the places and individuals associated with Church history. He counseled, “This year should be a time of learning. At the end of the year you should be familiar with what happened in places like Palmyra, New York; Kirtland, Ohio; Independence, Missouri; Nauvoo, Illinois; Winter Quarters, Nebraska; and Salt Lake City, Utah. You should be well acquainted with the great spirit and contributions of such remarkable individuals as Joseph and Hyrum Smith. . . . Names like Emma Smith, Mary Fielding Smith, Eliza R. Snow, and others of the remarkable women of the Church should not be strange to you.” Explaining why historical details regarding people and places matter, President Kimball continued, “Though facts are not important by themselves, they can bring great confidence to you as you explain and testify of the Restoration. So learn and remember as much as you can.”\(^{56}\) Implicit in President Kimball’s statement is not just learning about what happened in these places, but also about the places themselves.

In addition to learning about the locations of specific events, the Church seeks to reinforce the authenticity of its historical sites in both its interpretation of the events that occurred therein and reconstruction of the sites themselves. At these sites, Sara Patterson argues, members “come to experience their history and theology under the umbrella of authenticity.”\(^{57}\) As Jennifer Lund explained, “We’re interested in commemoration, but we’re more interested in restoration, to taking you back to the place and time. When people can walk into a space that was the way it looked when Joseph lived there, they have a much more profound connection. They understand sometimes the
scriptures better. All of a sudden, they understand the history better when they can be in not just the place, which you see in the commemoration model, but in the place and the time, and the event that you really see most effectively in the restoration model.”18 While it is important as teachers to try and take students back in time to understand the nuances of the Restoration, teachers must also be as authentic as possible in how they teach the scriptures and the history of the Restoration by reinforcing accurate historical truths rather than perpetuating popular myths or personal assumptions of how historical participants may have acted or how life may have been during an earlier era.

**Inspiring Faith and Motivating Toward Righteousness**

A second benefit accruing from the study of historic sites is the blessings that come from sacred spaces more generally. People visit religious heritage sites for obligatory, devotional, educational, and curiosity reasons, and to petition for health or otherworldly help.19 Freeman Tilden, an early leader in heritage interpretation, opined, “‘To pay a personal visit to a historic shrine is to receive a concept such as no book can supply,’ someone has said; and surely to stand at the rim of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado is to experience a spiritual elevation that could come from no human description of the colossal chasm.”20 At sites, and especially sacred religious sites, there is a spirit of place that impacts the visitor.

Visitors to Latter-day Saint historic sites “come for a variety of reasons,” observed former Church historian and recorder Elder Steven E. Snow, “but two of the main reasons are to remember what took place there and to reinforce faith. Parents bring their children so they feel the spirit of these sacred places. It is one thing to read about a handcart, but quite another to pull a handcart. Being in the Sacred Grove is a much more powerful experience than being taught about the Sacred Grove. Families want to feel the spirit of the places, and parents want their children to remember what others did who went before. So in my view it really is about remembering.”21 In this vein, Daniel Olsen has noted that Church historical sites are in part preserved and maintained to fulfill the Church’s objective to “perfect the Saints” through spiritual experiences that help Church members strengthen their individual testimonies of the restored gospel.22

Characterizing the value of these historic spaces, Elder Dennis B. Neuenschwander taught, “The faith and reverence associated with them and the respect we have for what transpires or has transpired in them make them holy. The importance of holy places and sacred space in our worship can hardly
Describing the impact a visit to the Sacred Grove had on him personally, he continued, “Some months ago on a beautiful late fall day, my wife and I sat in that grove. It was indeed beautiful, and we did enjoy the solitary peace we found there. However, it was significantly more than that, for we sat in the immediate vicinity where God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to the young Prophet Joseph Smith. Our faith in, and our reverence for, their visit and the personal sacrifice that ensued because of it, both in the Prophet’s life as well as in the lives of our own ancestors, transformed this beautiful spot into sacred space and a holy place.” Applying those feelings to other historic sites, Elder Neuenschwander continued, “Similar deep and reverent feelings are aroused by other sacred places across the earth relating to the history and establishment of this Church. These sacred places inspire our faith and give us encouragement to be true to that faith and to move forward, despite the challenges that may cross our path.”

Of course, not all visitors to religious heritage sites will have the same experience. While the authors have many cherished memories from visiting holy places around the world, including the Sacred Grove, an important lesson they have learned is that one cannot force spiritual experiences. Indeed, many people do not have the expected religious or spiritual experiences they seek when they go on a pilgrimage. As with any revelatory experience, God promises he will answer, but “it shall be in his own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:68). Teachers might remind students that God sets the conditions of revelation and they must do their part.

For example, while many like Elder Neuenschwander find the Sacred Grove “simply beautiful and peaceful,” not all experiences may be as positive. On one trip to Palmyra with my (Scott Esplin’s) young family, my wife and I wanted desperately for our children to have a meaningful experience in the Sacred Grove. Hoping to capture a memory of the visit, we decided to take a family picture upon entering the grove. As our family was being arranged for a picture, one child complained about where they were asked to stand, wondering why they always had to be next to a particular sibling. Another stood on their tiptoes, upsetting the others because now they were taller than the older ones. A third, tired of having to pose by what felt like every historical marker along the trip, whined about the need for a picture in the first place. Frustrated by the quickly deteriorating situation, I lost my temper. That day, the Sacred Grove was certainly far from sacred for my little family. To this day,
my children’s primary memory of their trip to the Sacred Grove is of when their dad got mad about a picture.

While people long for spiritual experiences in sacred spaces, teachers might also teach their youth, as Elder Neuenschwander concluded, that sites like the Sacred Grove are “sacred because of the faith and reverence we bring to it and the depth of sacrifice it represents.” If visitors fail to bring the requisite faith and reverence with them as they visit or learn about these sites, they cannot expect the desired result to be achieved.

**Sites Bear Witness of Historical Truths**

Closely related to the above point is that Church historic sites can help students gain a witness of the truth of the events that occurred there. “Historic places have powerful [and] provocative stories to tell,” a National Park Service website maintains. “As witnesses to the past, they recall the events that shaped history and the people who faced those situations and issues. Places make connections across time that give them a special ability to create an empathetic understanding of what happened and why.”

The empathetic connections made through the power of place can lead to revelation.

President Boyd K. Packer related a story where he visited a specific location because he wanted revelation. He shared, “President Harold B. Lee told me once that inspiration comes easier when you can set foot on the site related to the need for it.” Speaking to his audience at Brigham Young University, President Packer continued, “With a very sincere desire to be guided in preparing what I should say to you, early Sunday morning, before you were about, I stood in the Maeser Building [on the campus of BYU], and I found that President Lee was right!”

The same may be true as we encourage youth to visit historic sites. Thompson Mayes argued, “History can be understood at the real place where history actually happened in a way that it can’t be understood through documents and books alone.” As Mark Staker, a curator with the Historic Sites Division of the Church History Department, explained, “Every time I go to the Sacred Grove—and I can’t even tell you how many times I’ve been there—but every time I go to the Sacred Grove, I feel the Spirit. I feel a witness of the things that happened on that property and that Sacred Grove has come to represent that powerfully, that it’s the symbol of that moment when God spoke again to man. And it’s not a specific location in the grove, but it’s the fact that that grove is that symbol, and it tells us in a visual way of the setting where those events took place. I think that is so powerful and bears witness in
and of itself that those events happened.” Jennifer Lund further explained that her department’s hope is that visitors will have a sacred experience during their visit. “The Sacred Grove, of course, is probably our most significant historic site, and so we have given a great deal of attention to restoring that grove. We don’t usually talk about preservation, when it comes to a grove because trees die. It’s a living thing, and so we’re less [about] preserving individual trees as we are about preserving or restoring the living organism of this grove so that people today can have a similar experience to what Joseph Smith had in the 1820s.”

**Practical Ways to Incorporate Historic Sites into the Curriculum**

As teachers, most of us cannot easily travel with our students to Church curated historic sites like Palmyra, Kirtland, or Nauvoo. However, there are many ways in which teachers can incorporate the Church’s historical sites into their curriculum. One simple way to do so is to take advantage of students in a class who might have visited these locations who can share their experiences and the lessons they learned from their previous visits. As they do so, the Spirit can confirm the truthfulness of the Restoration to the other students in the classroom. Pictures and videos produced by the Church or those shared by students from their own visits to the sites can also be a powerful tool for visualizing historical and sacred space.

However, even if teachers wanted to take their students to these historic sites, the present COVID-19 pandemic would make this all but impossible. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated restrictions on travel have significantly impacted religious tourism and pilgrimage, with most religious heritage sites and religious gatherings in all faith traditions being forced to close or be canceled by government and health officials. These closures have led to many religious sites suffering great economic losses, particularly those that are heavily reliant on pilgrim and tourist donations. Faith communities have also struggled to find opportunities to “gather” together and strengthen communal religious identities.

As scholars of the history of pilgrimage note, pilgrims have always found new and novel ways of performing pilgrimages in times of war and plagues. In the same way, the closing of these sites has led these faith communities today to find new and novel ways of reaching out to the faithful and to help people maintain and increase faith during trying times. Indeed, the travel restrictions associated with the pandemic have spurred the proliferation of new forms of religious tourism and pilgrimage, including virtual visits to
religious sites. For example, there has been a strong digital response to the lack of religious mobility, where many religious sites have broadcasted their sacred rituals and ceremonies over the internet. Other religious sites have led virtual reality tours of their sites for pilgrims and tourists who could not visit. Some pilgrim organizations created apps that allowed pilgrims to walk in the safety of their hometown while tracking how far along their chosen pilgrimage trail they would have walked if they had been allowed to travel.

As Latter-day Saint historic sites closed to the public during the pandemic, site directors and missionaries likewise explored ways to connect virtually with those interested in Church history. Directors of historic sites—from the Sacred Grove to the Mormon Battalion Historic Site in San Diego—introduced missionary-led virtual tours to family and friends on social media. These virtual tours “spread like wildfire around the world.” This led to live tours being scheduled by seminary and institute classes, ward youth and adult groups, individuals, and families. The success of virtual technology led Gary Boatright, operations manager of historic sites for the Church History Department, to note, “When you think about what we were planning for 2020 to be like and what it’s turned out to be, in a real sense, we have a much more successful year this year in getting the story of these sacred places to the world.”

The proliferation of virtual Church history tours has expanded the reach of these sacred spaces of the Church around the globe. Estimating that less than 1 percent of the Church population might be able to visit many Church history sites, historic sites curator Benjamin C. Pykles noted, “We’re certainly hitting people that have never been able to experience these places in any way or in any fashion before. . . . There’s so much potential here. We’re just scratching the surface, and we’re excited to keep working towards those goals.” Gary Boatright concurred: “The Spirit can transcend technology and space and time and testify to someone who’s sitting in the Philippines watching the missionaries give a tour just as powerfully as they can to someone who’s standing in the Sacred Grove.”

Another way teachers can incorporate historic sites into their curriculum is by cultivating an understanding of and appreciation for local historic sites. In 1997 President Gordon B. Hinckley told the Saints of Guatemala, “This year we are commemorating the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the Mormon pioneers in the Salt Lake Valley. They came a long way in wagons and handcarts. They were pioneers. But pioneering continues to go on. All over the world we have pioneers, and you are among those pioneers.” Throughout his
ministry, he repeated a similar message. “The days of pioneering in the Church are still with us. They did not end with covered wagons and handcarts.”

Teachers might therefore consider helping students learn about the history of the Church in their own country, region, or city. Under the heading “Historic Sites,” the Church website provides extensive information about its places across the United States. Additionally, resources like “Pioneers in Every Land” or “Global Histories” provide valuable information about the Church and its history around the world. Furthermore, publications like the *Church News* or the “Sites Registry” of the Ensign Peak Foundation celebrate local historic sites, some of which will be in proximity of many students worldwide. By incorporating these sites into lessons and encouraging students to visit them, teachers reinforce President Hinckley’s message:

> It is good to look to the past to gain appreciation for the present and perspective for the future. It is good to look upon the virtues of those who have gone before, to gain strength for whatever lies ahead. It is good to reflect upon the work of those who labored so hard and gained so little in this world, but out of whose dreams and early plans, so well nurtured, has come a great harvest of which we are the beneficiaries. Their tremendous example can become a compelling motivation for us all, for each of us is a pioneer in his own life, often in his own family, and many of us pioneer daily in trying to establish a gospel foothold in distant parts of the world.

> We are still pioneering. We have never ceased pioneering from the time . . . that our people left Nauvoo and came . . . eventually into the valley of the Great Salt Lake. . . . We are reaching out everywhere, and that takes pioneering.

### Conclusion

Commemoration of historic sites and invitations to visit them have ancient scriptural roots. Biblically, the children of Israel were invited to remember their deliverance from Egypt with “a memorial,” a Passover celebration “throughout [their] generations . . . for ever” (Exodus 12:14). Specifically, they were to use the occasion to teach their children of the “strength of [the] hand [of] the Lord” that brought them freedom (Exodus 13:14). Centuries later, the New Testament powerfully tells the story of the ultimate day of deliverance when, on the morning of Christ’s resurrection, angels appeared to women who assembled at the empty tomb. Declaring, “He is not here: for he is risen,” the angels invited these witnesses to history to “come, see the place where the Lord lay” (Matthew 28:6; emphasis added).

Today, teachers likewise invite students to “come, see the place” where miraculous events occurred. As teachers of Church history, we testify of places where the heavens were opened, where God, Christ, and angels communed with humankind, where additional scripture was revealed and
translated, and where priesthood keys were bestowed. Demonstrating the significance of these sites, President Russell M. Nelson remarked, “Of all the priesthood assignments I’ve received in my life, the opportunity to dedicate the Priesthood Restoration Site was perhaps the most important.”

Gospel teachers can mirror the lengths the Church takes to study and preserve historic sites. As Jennifer Lund has summarized, “More than two dozen Church-owned sites from Vermont to California and one in England celebrate the Restoration of the gospel and the commitment of Latter-day Saints to establish God’s kingdom in our day. Numerous historic markers dot the landscape, as do historic temples, tabernacles, and meetinghouses. For many people, these sites are sacred, evoking a sense of awe, reverence, and personal connection.” As we help students learn about and reverence sacred spaces, we invite their power in our classrooms. Jennifer Lund continues, “Seeing the landscapes where key experiences unfolded can cultivate a deep sense of gratitude in those of us whose lives have been changed and blessed by the Restoration. . . . These sites can help open our eyes to the beauties of the principles of salvation and motivate us to embrace them with our whole hearts.” Indeed, “our Heavenly Father is desirous we remember.”

Notes


12. In the history of the Church, and even today, some Church members have undertaken difficult voyages at great sacrifice to receive temple blessings, mirroring an act of pilgrimage.
15. Sara M. Patterson, Pioneers in the Attic: Place and Memory along the Mormon Trail (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2020), xvi.
16. Patterson, Pioneers in the Attic, 25.
18. President Gordon B. Hinckley emphasized the importance of history to our beliefs. Speaking of Joseph Smith’s First Vision, he stated, “Every claim that we make concerning divine authority, every truth that we offer concerning the validity of this work, all finds its root in the First Vision of the boy prophet. . . . That becomes the hinge pin on which this whole cause turns. If the First Vision was true, if it actually happened, then the Book of Mormon is true. Then we have the priesthood. Then we have the Church organization and all of the other keys and blessings of authority which we say we have. If the First Vision did not occur, then we are involved in a great sham. It is just that simple.” Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 226–27.
19. Olsen, “Tourism and Informal Pilgrimage Among the Latter-day Saints,” 254–70. Sara Patterson has noted that “whether or not individual Mormons take on the language of pilgrimage, their activities echo certain traits of other religious pilgrimages around the world.” Pioneers in the Attic, 184.
22. Many scholars, however, have contested this Eliadean view of sacred space, suggesting that while religious organizations set apart sacred places from the rest of the profane world, it is not because the divine has ruptured in that location. Rather, sacred places are considered to be sacred only because someone in a position of power and authority decrees that the site is sacred. From this “constructivist” view, the sacred, holy, or divine is not a “thing”—it is not an “ontological given.” Instead, space is just an empty signifier or container until someone or some group deems that space to be sacred, after which that space is marked, sacralized, and maintained by those individuals or groups. G. Van der Leeuw, Religion in Essence and Manifestation (New York City: Harper and Row, 1933); Simon Coleman and Jas Elsner, Pilgrimage Past and Present in the World Religions (Cambridge, MA: Harvard
Since this marking, sacralizing, and maintaining is done in the context of social and power relations, these sacred locations therefore are open to contestation and multiple interpretations between different religious groups, within the same religious group, and between religious and secular groups. See David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, “Introduction,” in American Sacred Space, ed. David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 1–42. As such, sacred spaces and places are constantly being (re)negotiated within sociopolitical contexts at different scales. See Daniel H. Olsen, “The Symbolism of Sacred Space,” in Tourism, Pilgrimage and Intercultural Dialogue: Interpreting Sacred Stories, ed. Dolors Vidal-Casellas, Silvia Aulet, and Neus Crous-Costa (Wallingford, UK: CABI, 2019), 29–42.


25. Temples might on the surface seem to be constructed spaces, where Church leaders choose a mundane space to establish a holy temple. However, after dedication, Latter-day Saints believe that the Lord is truly present in the temple, and therefore constructed sacred space becomes poetic sacred space.


27. While beyond the scope of this paper, Latter-day Saint historic sites are also contested sacred spaces. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Community of Christ both own properties tied to the Restoration, with these properties at times being geographically beside each other. However, both faith communities differ when it comes to their devotional, historic, and first/third person interpretation of their shared heritage. Daniel H. Olsen and Dallen J. Timothy, “Contested Religious Heritage: Differing Views of Mormon Heritage,” Tourism Recreation Research 27, no. 2 (2002): 7–15; see David J. Howlett, Kirtland Temple: The Biography of a Shared Mormon Sacred Space (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); see also Scott C. Esplin, Return to the City of Joseph: Modern Mormonism’s Contest for the Soul of Nauvoo (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018).


32. Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (chronological scrapbook of typed entries and newspaper clippings, 1830–present), September 24, 1845, 1, Church History Library.

33. Scott G. Kenney, ed., Wilford Woodruff’s Journal (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983), 3:49. Though Wilford Woodruff speculated he was leaving Nauvoo for the last time with the exodus of 1846, he actually returned to the City of Joseph again two years later while on a his way to a mission in the East. He reported touring the temple, “from the bottom to the top,” finding it “in a much better state of preservation than I expected to find it.” 3:356–57.


45. Scott C. Esplin, *Return to the City of Joseph: Modern Mormonism’s Contest for the Soul of Nauvoo* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018). Because property transactions for much of historic Nauvoo were conducted quietly in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the years listed for the Woodruff, Young, and Browning properties as well as the pioneer burial ground are the dates the structures or sites were publicly dedicated. See also James B. Allen, “Nauvoo’s Masonic Hall,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 10 (1990): 39–49.

46. Jamshid Ghazi Askar, “LDS Church Buys Farmland, Haun’s Mill, Far West, Kirtland Property from Community of Christ,” *Deseret News*, May 5, 2012. While not frequently considered a historic site like the Sacred Grove or Carthage Jail, Salt Lake City’s Temple Square was treated like a historic site with the creation of a bureau of information on the grounds in 1902. It is the home of several historically important structures, most prominently the Salt Lake Temple and the Tabernacle.


48. Wilford Wood proposed some of the ideas for using the sites for proselyting. Wood was responsible for acquiring many early Latter-day Saint sites.


56. Spencer W. Kimball, “Who Am I?,” in *Church History and Doctrine Seminary Home-Study Course* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1984), unit 1, p. 1.

57. Patterson, *Pioneers in the Attic*, 58.


64. Neuenschwander, “Holy Space, Sacred Space”; emphasis added.


70. https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/articles/the-first-vision-podcast-episode-6-transcript.
75. For example, see https://www.theconqueror.events/camino/.
76. See, for example, https://nauvootours.as.me/schedule.php; Lindsay Williams, “These Church Historic Sites Are Offering Virtual Tours,” LDSLiving.com, https://www.ldsliving.com/These-Church-historic-sites-are-offering-virtual-tours/s/93249. The Doctrine and Covenants Central website also offers 360° tours of Church historical sites. See https://doctrineandcovenantscentral.org/places-of-the-doctrine-and-covenants/.
77. Rachel Sterzer Gibson, “How the Church Historic Sites Are Fulfilling Their Purpose during the Pandemic,” Church News, January 6, 2021. One historic sites curator noted that an unexpected effect of the pandemic and the eventual production of virtual tours was equalized opportunity for Saints to experience Church historic sites, especially for membership outside the United States. Personal communication with authors.
78. Gibson, “Church Historic Sites.”
79. Gibson, “Church Historic Sites.”
80. Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Gordon B. Hinckley (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), 82, 90.
81. See history.churchofjesuscrist.org.
82. For an example, see Kenneth Mays, “10 Notable but Not Well-Known Church History Sites in the U.S.—Plus 1 in England,” Church News, January 22, 2021. See also https://ensignpeakfoundation.org/sites-registry-2/.
87. Steven E. Snow, cited in Weaver, “Church Historic Sites Reinforce Faith and Help Us Remember.”
Elder Neal A. Maxwell of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught, “There is a difference, therefore, between being ‘anxiously engaged’ and being ‘over-anxious.’”
A Church Educator’s Guide to Identifying and Helping the Scrupulous Student

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Educators in the Church Educational System teach gospel doctrines and knowledge of the scriptures and also counsel students about personal issues such as strengthening testimony, learning how to receive personal revelation, working through difficult family or social circumstances, and solving specific issues in their lives. This often creates bonds of trust with students and students will often approach teachers with their intimate spiritual and temporal concerns.

As a Church educator, it is likely you have had these types of close relationships with students. It is likely also that you have experienced many instances when a youth, feeling this special bond and relationship of trust with you, comes to you privately in a spirit of penitent confession. In those moments, your training has taught you well to refer them to their bishop or other local ecclesiastical leader to work through “the pain, remorse, and depression associated with sin.” The bishop has the priesthood keys and spiritual stewardship over your student. However, there is a subset of students for which this standard referral may be inadequate to address the complexity of their concerns; they may need some additional counsel and referrals. This
guide aims to help you to identify and properly refer these students so their spiritual and mental health needs may be more effectively addressed.

This article begins with a discussion of perfectionism. It then illustrates how rigid, inflexible self-expectations of perfection can become destructive as individuals get trapped in an obsessive-compulsive cycle. Scrupulosity—or obsessive-compulsive thoughts about moral and religious issues—is then comprehensively defined, described, and illustrated. Since many caught in this obsessive-compulsive cycle do not recognize it as a mental health issue due to the religious content of their concerns, this article also provides tips for discerning scrupulosity from normative spiritual concerns. Lastly, the article recommends steps to take while counseling the scrupulous student.

To illustrate the principles discussed herein, this article uses many personal experiences, thoughts, and insights from those who have struggled with scrupulosity. Please know that each of these have been shared with permission. I am grateful to each of these courageous individuals for sharing their intimate stories so that you might be of greater service to the scrupulous students in your ministry.

Identifying the Scrupulous Student

Adaptive Perfectionism

Perfectionism can be both adaptive and maladaptive. Elder Neal A. Maxwell of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught, “There is a difference, therefore, between being ‘anxiously engaged’ and being ‘over-anxious.’”

The devout disciples that are “anxiously engaged” may be what we call adaptive perfectionists or positive perfectionists. Adaptive perfectionists set high standards for themselves, seeking to reap the positive consequences of success, not out of fear of negative evaluation or failure. So they have high standards for themselves but are not necessarily disturbed when those standards are not met. Failure results in adaptive behavior, such as engaging their problem directly, trying again, readjusting standards, working harder, or simply accepting the situation. Or if they do struggle when they fail to meet those standards, they are able to work through the situation, create flexibility in their thinking, and resiliently move forward. Indeed, researchers have found that working to meet high standards has been associated with higher self-esteem and life satisfaction.
In religious worship, the anxiously engaged are careful about living the gospel in all areas of their lives. They are conscientious about living the gospel in its fullness to the best of their ability. Researchers described this process: “Healthy religious observance . . . is generally typified by . . . moderate and flexible approaches to most areas of religious belief and practice, viewing perfect adherence as more of an ideal than as an imperative that is necessary to avoid subjective guilt or the threat of severe punishment.” As a religious educator, you’ve likely had private or public conversations with many such students and have noticed their strong faith and their ability to come to a healthy, balanced resolution about their difficulties even in the face of disappointment in themselves or their own behavior.

**Toxic Perfectionism**

The “over-anxious” disciples in your ministry are students that may struggle with maladaptive or toxic perfectionism or obsessive-compulsive anxiety. This type of negative perfectionism, often constitutes a frantic effort to live error-free: “the tendency to believe there is a perfect solution to every problem, that doing something perfectly (i.e., mistake free) is not only possible, but also necessary, and that even minor mistakes will have serious consequences.”

These students are generally very loyal to God and committed to keeping his commandments and trying to perfectly follow him, but when they fail to meet their own unattainably high standards they are overcome by anxiety, panic, and obsessive rumination about their perceived failures. Instead of actively engaging their problems, negative perfectionists tend to avoid them. Negative perfectionism is associated with categorical thinking, the tendency to view the world in black-or-white terms, and intolerance and distrust of others. One researcher explained, “The perfectionist paradigm typically combines unrealistic expectations with an unhealthy preoccupation with faults, weaknesses, mistakes, and sins. . . . Fear of failure is a constant concern. Though it is correlated with conscientiousness, perfectionism goes far beyond diligent effort and ‘demand[s] absolute perfection from the self.’ Perfectionists tend to engage in an unrelenting quest for flawlessness and berate themselves or others for falling short of this impossible standard.” This researcher summarized, “Thus the problem with perfectionism is not high expectations; it is neurotic expectations that are unrealistic and oppressive.”

The overanxious students’ faith is strong, equal to the faith of anxiously engaged students; they are wonderful, dedicated disciples! Yet their toxic
perfectionism creates problematic, inflexible thinking that often paralyzes them spiritually as a result of anxiety’s compelling influence. President Boyd K. Packer taught that “our physical body is the instrument of our spirit” and that it houses “delicate physical senses which have to do with spiritual communication.” Anxiety disrupts these “delicate physical senses” because it causes our brains to release chemicals that create physiological responses that compete with the Spirit. It can be difficult to differentiate between what our body feels because of spiritual sensations and what it feels because of its release of various stress hormones.

This compelling, uncomfortable physiological anxiety reaction is what keeps many people stuck in a destructive cycle of anxiety. For example, one individual shared, “I felt trapped with anxiety. I looked to find relief from the anxious feelings that surrounded my fears and doubts. . . . The anxiety mounted because even though I knew deep down inside I really should be okay and acceptable to God, I couldn’t feel it because of the adrenaline that was flowing through my body. Because of this physiological process, I couldn’t fully feel peace and was unable to relax and let the Spirit ‘really’ talk or whisper to me.” Another individual echoed those sentiments: “OCD and scrupulosity will always generate a stressful and anxious response to your mind and body. For the longest time, that is what kept me from being able to see the truth. I would always think that because I was so stressed and anxious about this thought it must be true. I didn’t have the skills to not be anxious about the topic.”

Maladaptive or toxic perfectionism is in large part defined by a feeling of discrepancy, the feeling that one is never good enough. Discrepancy has been associated with guilt and shame. One author explained, “We are not good enough for ourselves because we don’t fit with our own image of perfection. We cannot forgive ourselves for not being what we wish to be, or rather what we believe we should be. We cannot forgive ourselves for not being perfect.”

This perceived discrepancy has a significant impact on the individual’s sense of worth. Researchers have noted, “Maladaptive perfectionists, compared to non-perfectionists, seem to suffer from a misperception of their worthiness, rather than lacking confidence in their academic performance. . . . This suggests that when working with maladaptive perfectionist students, counselors should differentiate between self-esteem (worth) and self-efficacy (ability), and focus attention on the former.”
Scrupulosity

In addition, the high anxiety of toxic perfectionism can morph into a more extreme problem, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). One researcher said, “OCD sufferers may initially be seeking to be scrupulous (in a nonpathological sense), but the problem grows until functioning is severely affected. The initial concern was appropriate, the eventual consequences destructive.”

The term “scrupulosity” is literally derived from the Latin word *scrupulum* (“small stone”), which evokes an image of a sharp stone or small pebble in one’s shoe. Researchers noted a subsequent shift in definition: “a later meaning was a minute apothecaries’ weight, one twenty-fourth of an ounce, so small as to affect only the most sensitive scales. The term in English acquired a moral interpretation of a thought or circumstance so insignificant as to affect only a very delicate conscience.” It entered “the religious vocabulary to describe people with overconcern and hesitation concerning all areas of appetitive behavior and commonly ‘assailed by naughty and blasphemous thoughts.’”

Scrupulosity is a religiously themed subtype of OCD. It is “a psychological disorder primarily characterized by pathological guilt or obsession associated with moral or religious issues that is often accompanied by compulsive moral or religious observance and is highly distressing and maladaptive.” Being religious does not make one prone to scrupulosity; however, “if OCD develops in an individual who is very religious, his or her religiosity is likely to express itself in the OCD.” One researcher summarized that “a cardinal feature of scrupulosity is persistent uncertainty leading to anxiety and fear about whether or not one has committed religious or moral sin.” In scrupulosity, “three types of beliefs pertain to intolerance of uncertainty: (1) beliefs about the necessity for being certain; (2) beliefs that one has a poor capacity to cope with unpredictable change; and (3) beliefs about the difficulty of adequate functioning in inherently ambiguous situations.”

Anxiety is a future-oriented emotion. Yet scrupulosity keeps individuals tormented by past sins, events, details, mistakes, and the like because of the uncertainty felt and the overestimation of threat about how those issues may affect their future salvation. Also, at times it is the case that they suffer with obsessive rumination even when they did nothing wrong, but they worry about the possibility of having committed sin, and they second-guess and doubt their intentions or motives in various situations. They wonder if their motives were 100 percent pure at every moment. The uncertainty that
these “nonlogical doubts” create is highly anxiety provoking and distressing for the scrupulous individual. One individual explained, “The best way I can describe scrupulosity would be a thought would enter my mind that would trigger a stress reaction that begins the process of worrying if that thought is true. My mind almost starts working at hyperspeed coming up with thoughts that would support the triggering thought being true, even though it is not. Stress and anxiety typically make scrupulosity worse, so I begin entering a downward spiral where I feel like I can’t get out.”

These religious obsessive-compulsive symptoms do not represent a generally more severe form of OCD, but they do represent a particularly distressing presentation of OCD. In talking about their experience with scrupulosity, individuals have used words and phrases such as “tortured,” “paralyzed,” “haunted,” “excruciating,” “debilitating,” “suffering so severely,” “completely overwhelmed,” “so deeply painful, embarrassing, and frustrating,” and such. In all my years of work with psychotherapy clients, I have never felt so much pain and agony in my office as I have in working with those suffering with scrupulosity. For example, one individual summarized his panic: “I started to become fixated on perfectionism in the form of making my calling and election made sure and the fear of falling and not being exalted. The duration of eternity and not being exalted terrifies me.”

In public and personal religious worship, conventional religious rituals are done to connect with the divine, maintain tradition, participate in community, and help maintain a sense of peace and meaning in the face of trials and stress. Yet scrupulosity’s tyranny transforms normative conventional religious rituals into compulsive rituals. For example, prayer, scripture study, and church and temple attendance no longer create peace or feelings of connection with the Spirit but are done out of fear of punishment and create feelings of condemnation. One individual commented that his prayers were “repetitive” and that he was “always just begging” for forgiveness all the time.

Summarizing several studies on guilt, one researcher commented, “Scrupulous rituals serve the opposite function of their intended purpose. Scrupulous rituals are driven not only by an obsessive need for certainty, to achieve a state of perfection, and to feel ‘right,’ but also to allay guilt caused by an obsession that violated the literal ‘letter’ of the religious law (i.e., a blasphemous thought). As a result, the ‘spirit’ of the religious law—that one is forgiven for (unintended) transgressions—becomes lost on the sufferer who
is not able to experience the intended restorative benefit the ritual was created to provide.”

Indeed, scrupulosity eclipses one’s view of heaven, the nature of God, and the role of the Atonement of Jesus Christ in one’s life and eternal journey. It distorts, corrupts, and obscures beautiful gospel truths. Researchers examined the relationship between the principles of grace and legalism relative to mental health in Brigham Young University students. Grace was defined as a view that God is active in helping us in our lives, while legalism referred to a strict, literal or excessive conformity to a religious code. They found that “the higher the subjects’ legalistic beliefs were, the less they reported experiencing God’s grace and, in turn, the poorer the mental health outcomes. . . . A legalistic view of God may lead to poorer mental health partially because it interrupts the ability to experience grace. Legalistic beliefs and practices appear to diminish a sense that God is aware of their concerns, attends to their needs, and provides for them through divine grace.”

Scrupulosity is legalistic because as religious practice gets narrow and extreme, it becomes focused on marking off checklists to satisfy specific obsessinal issues rather than seeking to live according to broader gospel principles. Indeed, researchers have found legalism to be positively correlated with perfectionism, scrupulosity, anxiety, depression, and shame. One individual came to the awareness that the God she had been worshipping was the “wrong God” because in her mind he was a “scary dictator-with-a-checklist type of God.”

The frantic efforts to check gospel to-dos off a list, attempting to live each moment with absolute, dogmatic perfection may give an individual a momentary sense of control while in a swirl of anxiety, but in the end it obfuscates pure doctrine while the obsessive-compulsive anxiety is reinforced. One individual, now recovered from scrupulosity, reflected, “Ironically, in trying so hard to live the gospel through the lens of scrupulosity, I was actually doing the complete opposite, without even realizing it or meaning to. I was completely denying Christ—who he is, what he did, and his role in my life. I couldn’t stop believing that it was by my merits and my perfection, not his, that my salvation was determined. I didn’t believe his Atonement applied to me, and I was trying to save myself.” In other words, “scrupulosity masquerades as a desirable, higher standard of righteousness and personal worthiness—but it’s not! Instead, it actually denies Christ and his gospel. Scrupulosity replaces our loving, merciful Father and his Spirit with punishing, crippling anxiety
and guilt, creating a rigid, demanding checklist approach to gospel living. This is because scrupulosity isn’t about faith; it’s about obsessive anxiety.”

Helping the Scrupulous Student

*Tips to Assist Those with Scrupulous Fears While Teaching*

As you teach, awareness of maladaptive perfectionism and scrupulosity can positively influence how you communicate to your students about sensitive issues. Here are some points to consider as you teach your classes:

1. Avoid casual statements indicating your opinion surrounding confession or other gospel principles that someone with scrupulosity may internalize as fact or doctrine.
2. Avoid turning gospel principles into checklists.
3. Express faith, hope, and confidence that the Atonement of Christ, not our own effort, saves and perfects us!

First, a problematic area of concern for those with scrupulosity is the confession of sin. So, avoiding statements of opinion about how to apply the doctrine of confession or other gospel principles is imperative. Teach the doctrine, share scripture, and read from General Authorities, Church documents, the Church’s Bible Dictionary, and the like. For example, the Bible Dictionary entry for “confession” states: “Confession to a church official (in most cases the bishop) is necessary whenever one’s transgression is of a nature for which the Church might impose loss of membership or other disciplinary action. The bishop cannot and does not forgive sin, but he may judge the matter and waive the penalty that the Church might otherwise impose against the person. The repentant sinner must still make confession and obtain forgiveness of the Lord.”

One individual reported the one thing he remembered from a particular seminary teacher was a statement made in class lecture that if a student was unsure if she or he should confess to the bishop about a potential sin, then that meant they probably should. This statement, although well meaning, is not accurate when compared with the Church’s statement above. For example, this type of opinion stated by a teacher can unwittingly create difficulty for those students with maladaptive perfectionism or OCD scrupulosity who may have the urge to confess every minor questionable thought that comes into their head. The types of thoughts that some with scrupulosity end up confessing to ecclesiastical leaders include such things as “I doubt God,” “I
can’t be sure if my motives were pure,” “Was I completely honest?,” “Did I look at that advertisement of a person in a bathing suit a moment too long, turning it into pornography?” Clearly, these types of thoughts are concerning to one with scrupulosity, but they are not “of a nature for which the Church might impose loss of membership or other disciplinary action.” In fact, Church leaders do not impose discipline for thoughts.

Even though this particular individual now understands his own scrupulosity, the doctrine of confession, and the unhelpfulness of the teacher’s statement for someone with scrupulosity (it is actually the opposite of what the scrupulosity sufferer should do), this teacher’s opinion still hangs with him when he has the urge to compulsively confess, causing him anxiety and self-doubt. Therefore, it is best to avoid such statements. In class, if a student is taught the Church’s official position on confession and is still uncertain if a sin needs confession to a bishop (beyond personal confession to the Lord), refer them to their parents who may more accurately be able to hear their concern and, with parental discernment, counsel them appropriately.

Second, avoid turning gospel principles into checklists. Gospel checklists will torment the scrupulous student with hopes that they can be saved if they just follow all the right steps. Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles gave a training to seminary and institute teachers in which he stated the importance of being mindful about this issue. Throughout the training he talked about needing to base teaching on gospel principles and stated, “We’ve got to not turn things into checklists and formulas.”19 This teaching is particularly critical for those with OCD. In a podcast I talked about the potential damage of a list-like approach to gospel living, “because someone with OCD is going to go through and they are going to make sure they have checked off every little thing on that checklist, and then they’re going to wonder why they still feel so horrible.”40

Third, express faith, hope, and confidence that the Atonement of Christ, not our own effort, saves and perfects us! Since scrupulosity corrupts an individual’s perception of the nature of God and the Atonement of Christ, it can be helpful for students to have their Church educators share the many hopeful doctrines of eternity. For example, we are taught that God’s nature is one of eternal love. This doctrine can easily be found in teachings of the apostles and prophets and all four standard works. A sampling follows: Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught, “The first great truth of all eternity is that God loves us with all of His heart, might,
mind, and strength.” In the Old Testament we are taught, “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end” (Jeremiah 29:11). In the New Testament we are taught, “But God commendeth his love towards us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). In the Book of Mormon we are taught, “I began to pray unto the Lord that he would have mercy on me, according to the multitude of his tender mercies” (1 Nephi 8:8). And in the Doctrine and Covenants, in a revelation to Joseph Smith in 1830, Jesus Christ taught, “Lift up your hearts and be glad, for I am in your midst, and am your advocate with the Father; and it is his good will to give you the kingdom” (Doctrine and Covenants 29:5). One individual reflected about an experience with a seminary teacher: “I remember my junior year someone asked about the celestial kingdom, and my teacher looked at us and sincerely stated, ‘I think that everyone in this room will make it to the celestial kingdom.’ That really helped and inspired me and boosted my confidence.”

**Tips for Recognizing Scrupulosity**

The overanxious students are loyal to God. Yet that strength can become their downfall. Students that are chronically concerned about the uncertainty of whether or not they have sinned are not able to lay hold to a healthy, peaceful relationship with spiritual belief and religious worship and often become frustrated with feelings of hopelessness. Just as with bothersome pebbles in one’s shoe, unwanted and intrusive thoughts of doubt or unworthiness return again and again no matter how hard they try to repent or how much others may counsel them or reassure them.

As recognizing scrupulosity can be difficult because of the powerful, compelling physiological impulses created by anxiety that compete with feelings of the Spirit, here are a few tips to help the religious educator:

1. Identify the feelings the student is experiencing. Are they characteristics of anxiety or spiritual promptings?
2. Is the student careful in all areas of gospel living, or do they have a pet obsession or two that exceed what is required by religious doctrine? Are they perhaps focused on insignificant religious rituals (while ignoring other important aspects of their religious beliefs)?
3. If there is a legitimate sin clearly identified that is needing repentance or confession, is the student experiencing godly sorrow or anxiety?

4. Does repentance work for the student?

First, for many, there is difficulty discerning between a spiritual prompting and an anxious, scrupulous obsession. Due to the religious content of the obsessive thoughts, the individual often simply accepts their problem as a religious one without examination. It doesn’t occur to them that anything else could be going on because there isn’t a question in their mind as to what is going on—from their perspective, a thought about worthiness (for example) is the Spirit communicating to them. Yet a common cognitive distortion I have seen in clients with scrupulosity is “I feel unworthy, so I must be unworthy.” For some, it may never occur to them that their problem is an anxiety problem until someone else talks with them about it. In my clinical work as a psychologist, this has been the single largest barrier to successful treatment outcomes that I have encountered with clients. Months into therapy, some clients are still enticed by the idea that their doubts and fears may really just be the Spirit communicating to them about some significant failing in their moral core.

Asking the student to identify their feelings can be helpful in clarifying the driving force in their emotional experience. If the student is worried or agitated; feeling fear, panic, or a sense of crisis (even for minor issues); feeling impulsive (such as feeling like they have to go to talk to their bishop right now or they are going to hell); feeling confusion, debilitating guilt, and despair then they are clearly under anxiety’s influence. The Spirit does not operate through intimidation, fear, and condemnation. Elder Richard G. Scott taught, “Two indicators that a feeling or prompting comes from God are that it produces peace in your heart and a quiet, warm feeling.” We learn such truths from the scriptures: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance” (Galatians 5:22–23). These spiritual feelings contribute to an overall sense of “goodness and righteousness and truth” (Ephesians 5:9).

Second, the scrupulous individual will generally have obsessional concerns “regarding a few particular facets of religious practice, which ironically may interfere with other (often more important) aspects of observance.” This is one signal that a student may be suffering from scrupulosity. It is common for the overanxious, scrupulous individual to have specific concerns that
their obsessions and anxiety swirl around. One individual with scrupulous fears around honesty reported that he was “paralyzed by this anxiety—that unless I was overkill in honesty, I wasn’t going to make it to the celestial kingdom.” A single student with scrupulous fears around living the law of chastity perfectly may choose not to date, hoping to be able to avoid any thoughts or circumstances that may evoke feeling physically attracted to someone and possibly experiencing some sensation of sexual arousal. The topics specific to their obsessions evoke tremendous anxiety for these individuals, yet, interestingly, it is common that these individuals may be more casual in other areas of gospel living.

Third, godly sorrow is not driven by anxiety. Adaptive guilt is helpful to us in our spiritual journey as it pricks us when we “have truly wronged another or violated a personal [or religious] standard for which rectification is appropriate.”49 This type of guilt is part of godly sorrow. Alma teaches, “Only let your sins trouble you, with that trouble which shall bring you down unto repentance” (Alma 42:29). Even if a student is guilty of a particular sin that is pricking their conscience, their remorse should lead them to repentance, not to panic and despair.

True repentance allows each of us as sinners to be reconciled with God through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Nephi states, “Believe in Christ, and . . . be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23). Yet if a student works through the repentance process in a spirit of godly sorrow and is still unable feel reconciled to God, unable to feel peace or to feel clean and worthy, this is a signal that toxic guilt and toxic anxiety may be driving them. One individual shared his struggle trying to feel clean after working with his bishop to resolve sin: “My problems with scrupulosity developed when I was about seventeen years old. I had to clear things up so that I could get ready for my mission and was confessing things that I needed to. I would go into the bishop’s office and confess sometimes multiple times in a week, not all new sins, but a lot of describing the sins that I had made in more detail. I also saw accidents as something that I needed to confess. I then never got to the spot where I could consider myself clean or worthy. I went on day to day thinking that I was unworthy, and I kept needing to get told by a leader that I was worthy.”

One individual learned how to move past her anxiety: “I’ve come to feel the difference between the Spirit gently whispering to me when I have actually sinned and when a correction is needed versus the relentless anxiety that
led me to obsess about every tiny mistake and to try to be absolutely perfect in every detail. I’ve learned how to repent in a productive and cleansing way when I sin instead of the compulsive, repetitive, futile ‘repentance’ I was driven to in the past.”

Fourth, repentance does not work as it should when toxic anxiety is at the core of the student’s concern. Many with scrupulosity have a deep and abiding determination to do whatever is necessary to be worthy and acceptable to their Father in Heaven. They may be concerned about a blatant sin, a possible sin, or their motives and intentions. They may do all the things they have been taught to do in order to repent but they do not feel peace and do not feel clean; repenting does not bring relief. One individual shared this thought: “I didn’t have the judgment at the time to know what was really happening—all I knew is I felt horrible and couldn’t feel better. I didn’t know what to do and I was totally stuck. ‘Repenting’ wasn’t working.”

This is in direct contrast to the true doctrine of repentance that teaches us that as we turn to Christ, he will accept us, cleanse us, and heal us. In the Book of Mormon, Alma was “racked with torment” and “harrowed up by the memory” of his sins (Alma 36:17, 19). Alma’s description of his pain and torment, like others that are guilty of great sin, is similar to the feelings and experiences of those with scrupulosity. Yet Alma was relieved of his torment upon receiving Christ: “O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness. . . . I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more. And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold” (Alma 36:18–20). He also commented, “I did cry out unto the Lord Jesus Christ for mercy . . . and I did find peace to my soul” (Alma 38:8). In other words, repentance works in the gospel of Jesus Christ for the sinner, but for those struggling with obsessive-compulsive anxiety it doesn’t work so well. Certainly, those with scrupulosity can repent of sin and have that repentance accepted of the Lord, but they do not feel it has been accepted and they are not able to experience the “joy” and “marvelous light” of repentance.

Counseling the Scrupulous Student

These students need you, as religious educators, to understand, even when they do not, that their problem is actually not related to the content of their concern (such as a perceived sin in a particular area). Their problem lies in the process of their concern—obsessive-compulsive anxiety. When you understand that, you will know as they stand at your gate that the best course of
action is not simply to refer them to an ecclesiastical leader. A comprehensive approach to the scrupulous student is recommended to meet their spiritual and mental health needs.

Here, I outline four steps to take in counseling the scrupulous student:

1. Counsel the student about the anxious flavor of your interactions with them. Teach them about scrupulosity. Suggest that their problem may not be a spiritual problem but instead may be a mental health issue regarding toxic perfectionism or obsessive-compulsive anxiety.

2. Refer them to their parents for support and to get help accessing resources.

3. Refer them to their bishop to clarify the nature of their concerns, educating them about the bishop’s role. Make contact with the bishop, with the student’s permission, to talk about your impressions of what may be going on with the student.

4. Suggest they make an appointment to be assessed by a mental health professional trained in the treatment of OCD. Explain to them that a bishop and a therapist occupy different roles and that both may be necessary for helping them to overcome their concerns.

**Highlight the Role of Anxiety in Current Concerns**

As you engage in discussion with the scrupulous student about their concerns, it is likely you will come to be able to recognize their anxiety. For example, in one study researchers sought perspectives and experiences of ultra-Orthodox Jewish rabbis with scrupulous parishioners. Several rabbis highlighted that they were able to discern the maladaptive nature of scrupulosity by the urgent manner in which the inquiries were made followed by a demand for an immediate answer. One rabbi described, “When I answer such a person, he keeps debating, raising some far-fetched scenarios which perhaps I haven’t considered. He jumps from one subject to another, forcing me to repeat my answers again and again. You can see that the person is trapped in some kind of mechanism.” Another rabbi described the feeling of “not being listened to... I was doing my utmost to answer the questions of such a person, but it felt that he was caught in his own thoughts, repeatedly asking the same questions I just answered, at times with minor changes without even considering my advice.”

When the maladaptive nature of their anxiety becomes apparent to you, first, counsel them about the anxious flavor of your interactions with them. Let them know they sound anxious or stressed. Ask them if their worry is unmanageable. For example, one individual began to understand the impulsive nature of anxiety. He would often have feelings such as “Do this now, or you’re going to go to hell!” Yet in time he learned that the Spirit is not impulsive and that revelation is not that easy. He learned to give himself time: “OK, if you feel this way in two days you can act on it. If not, you know what was going on.” Typically, after a couple of days the anxiety was gone. In treatment, I will often encourage people to put a pause on a confession to an ecclesiastical leader while they are trying to figure out how to discern between their anxiety and promptings of the Spirit. If it is truly a prompting from the Spirit to repent, the need to repent will still be there in a few days or weeks; if it is a prompting from anxiety the concern will disappear once the individual is distracted and has some distance from it.

Then educate the student about scrupulosity. Many people do not know about scrupulosity and don’t understand that religious concerns can even be related to mental health concerns. Suggest to the student that their problem may not be a spiritual problem related to their strength of faith or worthiness, but that it may be a mental health issue regarding toxic perfectionism or obsessive-compulsive anxiety.

The goal here is not to be a therapist and convince the student that they have scrupulosity or to try to diagnose them but just to plant the seed of possibility in their mind for them to ponder. For example, you might say something like “It might just be possible that the issue isn’t that you didn’t repent properly. It sounds like you’re really anxious.” Other individuals such as a therapist can be responsible to more fully explore with the student their experiences and feelings and assess them for a diagnosis.

Invite Parental Involvement

Second, if you suspect that this is an issue for your student, prayerfully consider if you should contact their parents directly or invite the student to address their parents on their own. Many parents will not understand scrupulosity and will need to be educated about the complexity of the issue. You may want to refer them to this or other articles to learn more.

Parents can provide the student access to resources, such as locating therapists, providing insurance coverage, and supplying money for therapy.
session fees. These are important practical issues that many students don’t understand, requiring their parents’ assistance.

In addition, parents often function as a student’s primary social support. They can offer encouragement and love. They can talk through with the student what they are learning in treatment to facilitate internalizing therapy principles. They can hold the student accountable to follow through with ecclesiastical meetings and/or therapy sessions. They can support the student in completing therapy homework assignments between sessions. One individual shared their experience:

Opening up to my parents allowed them to take crucial steps in helping me recover, the biggest of which was helping me find a great therapist who understood how to help me. My parents have not been able to take away my OCD, but their support, love, and intentions to understand and show empathy have lifted and encouraged me to work through a lot of the therapy process. Also, I received two priesthood blessings from my father that have helped me immensely on the road to recovery. I think about them almost every day. . . . I’m grateful that in my case, it was my dad who could give me those priesthood blessings and that my parents have been people that I can open up to and discuss my feelings. They have been pivotal means of support throughout my ongoing OCD recovery process.

As with this individual, many students rely heavily on their parents for counsel and reassurance. Therefore, as parents learn more about the scrupulosity with which their child suffers (if such a diagnosis for them is warranted), they need to be taught that offering reassurance to their child relative to their scrupulous fears will not ultimately help them break free from the obsessive-compulsive cycle and heal. The natural reaction of a parent is to offer their child reassurance that they are OK spiritually, and in truth, they are. However, offering this type of reassurance or answering questions about whether they are OK spiritually interferes with the main therapy goal of scrupulosity treatment. Treatment seeks to maintain uncertainty for the individual, which is “to break the association between fear and uncertainty about having possibly sinned” and to “learn to manage the uncertainty in a functional way.”

For example, one individual illustrates the importance of his connection with his father, while also showing that his father’s reassurance wasn’t sufficient to help him therapeutically. “Over the course of six weeks, I met with the branch president at the Missionary Training Center and confessed six times. I always remembered more. . . . At one point in the MTC, I emailed my dad, asking if I needed to confess yet another past ‘sin’ that I had thought of. When he told me that I hadn’t done anything wrong, it didn’t bring me
relief. Instead, I took it as a sign that Satan was using my family’s mercy to lull me into complacency. I grew convinced that I would have to endure alone . . . And I confessed again.”

Therefore, you can suggest to the student that it could be helpful to them to ask their parents to offer support and love but not engage with them regarding the content of their scrupulous fears. If the student does seek reassurance from a parent, the parent can be instructed to answer. “I am sorry you are struggling, but that’s a scrupulosity question so I can’t answer that for you.” Or “I know this is painful. I’m sorry. I sure love you! Yet that is an OCD question, so you’ll need to work through your anxiety about it.”

Make a Referral to an Ecclesiastical Leader

Third, if the student clearly has an issue that would be important to confess to an ecclesiastical leader, or if the student remains uncertain if confession to an ecclesiastical leader is warranted and they are uncomfortable speaking to their parents about the issue, refer them to their bishop for working through the repentance process or to clarify the nature of their concerns.

As a judge in Israel, the bishop will know what type of approach to take to the student’s confession or discussion of concern. Sometimes bishops will discern a genuine spiritual issue that they will address and work with the student to resolve. Sometimes bishops will believe the issue is not of significant importance requiring their intervention and they may reassure their parishioner that they are OK from a spiritual standpoint. However, a caution for educators and ecclesiastical leaders: if the student’s concern is of a scrupulous nature, reassurance that they are OK will only comfort them temporarily and then the anxiety will return. One researcher explained, “The scrupulous person . . . tends to be mistrustful of himself and of others—including the many confessors he has ‘tried’—and to cling to one conviction, that of his own sinfulness.”

One individual shared his story, vividly illustrating the futile nature of reassurance from authority figures when a problem is scrupulous in nature:

It began when I remembered something I had done when I was nineteen which launched me into a period of frantic obsession. I became extremely concerned about times I thought I had broken the law. This fear was fueled by the need to “obey, honor, and sustain the law.” Normally mental compulsions of repentance were enough to eventually make me feel better. This time though I could not find any relief for the guilt I felt because in order to truly repent I felt I needed to make things right with legal authorities which terrified me. So I ended up sitting in the
discomfort day after day until I called the police and confessed (which I did with them telling me I was legally fine) and until I eventually went and talked to my bishop who reassured me that I had done nothing wrong. I felt peaceful for probably ten or fifteen minutes before I again was unable to cope with the thoughts of going to jail, displeasing God, and never being happy again. At the time I worked in the stake offices every Tuesday for my young single adult stake, and the Tuesday after speaking to my bishop, I went and talked to my stake president, who likewise assured me I was spiritually fine and helped me go over every concern I had in detail. He explained to me in a logical way why they were not legally or morally wrong. This helped temporarily, but ultimately things continued to be miserable. I could not sleep or eat any significant amount during this time and lost ten pounds in a little over a week. I isolated myself in my bedroom and asked for priesthood blessings from someone almost every day. I became suicidal during this time in the sense that I wanted to die, for God to end my life.

Since those with scrupulosity cannot find peace from their anxiety on their own, they often cling to those in authority to reassure them, hoping that it will assuage their anxiety. This individual confessed to three different sources of authority—the police, the bishop, and the stake president—and, painfully, still had his mental health deteriorate, ending up in a suicidal crisis. Since reassurance from an authority, religious or otherwise, will not ultimately bring lasting peace to the scrupulous individual, it is a wise bishop who can discern the over-anxious disciple. In a podcast interview, I was interviewed by host Morgan Jones about the nature of scrupulosity. She shared this personal story:

I've realized that this is something that I think I likely struggled with when I was younger, and up until a couple years ago when I literally left the temple and immediately called my bishop thinking, “I need to confess something.” And I went in to the bishop and he basically just said, “This is not something that you should be here for.” ... And it was so helpful to me. I think sometimes the reaction is like, “Oh, you’re just such a good person. So, it’s so good of you that you would think that you would need to come and confess that.” And for the first time, somebody said to me, “You really shouldn’t be here for this,” rather than applauding that.

This particular bishop understood the flavor of an overanxious confession. However, since scrupulosity is not known or well understood by many, a bishop or other ecclesiastical leader may not be aware of scrupulosity and may unwittingly allow or even encourage repeated meetings and confessions and reinforce obsessive and compulsive tendencies. In time, the bishop may realize that they are caught with the student in an anxious cycle. This can wear down both the student and the bishop. Therefore, it would be helpful to ask the student for permission to contact their ecclesiastical leader. In that
communication, you may be able to share with the Church leader the nature of your discussions with the student and your impression that it may be an issue of overanxiety. You may also share some of what you know about scrupulosity and invite the leader to learn more. This intervention could save the student and the ecclesiastical leader from spending a lot of time, energy, and spiritual pain going around in circles about a scrupulous concern and allow them to consider the best approach to dealing with the anxiety.

**Make a Referral to a Mental Health Professional**

Fourth, if your student is showing signs of scrupulosity it would be useful to recommend that they seek an assessment or treatment from a psychologist or other trained mental health professional that works specifically with OCD.

It is important to educate the student and parents about the bishop’s role as a Church leader contrasted to the role of a trained mental health professional. Explain to them that a bishop and a therapist occupy different roles and that both may be necessary for helping them to overcome their concerns. Elder Alexander B. Morrison of the Quorum of the Seventy taught, “We must understand, however, without in any way denigrating the unique role of priesthood blessings, that ecclesiastical leaders are spiritual leaders and not mental health professionals. Most of them lack the professional skills and training to deal effectively with deep-seated mental illnesses and are well advised to seek competent professional assistance for those in their charge who are in need of it.” Please suggest to the student and their parents that they make an appointment to be assessed by a mental health professional trained in the treatment of OCD. By the same token, the therapist will not seek to take on the role of the bishop. Even though the content of therapy will involve religious themes, the focus for the mental health professional is on the treatment of anxiety.

It may also be useful to suggest to the scrupulous student that they have their ecclesiastical leader and mental health professional consult with each other (often this occurs by video chat or phone call while the individual is with the therapist). Clinicians working with clients who were members of The Church of Jesus of Christ of Latter-day Saints explained:

Ecclesiastical consultations also serve the valuable purpose of lending credibility or authority to the therapist in the eyes of the client. If the scrupulous person places a high value on doing what is right in the sight of God (often as interpreted by the priesthood leader’s perspective in whom the LDS scrupulous person likely has high
confidence), then having the therapist and the priesthood leader on the “same page” regarding treatment lends some borrowed trust and credibility from the priesthood leader to the therapist. Essentially, if the therapist can demonstrate that the bishop and the therapist are in agreement, then client compliance on the part of the LDS scrupulous person increases significantly.

The bishop will play a supportive role. Lending credibility to the therapist and encouraging the client to pursue treatment are important because it will be the trained mental health professional working with the student in therapy sessions that will allow them to change and heal from the obsessive-compulsive cycle. Treatment will not diminish the faith of the scrupulous student, but will, in the end, allow them to reconnect with the divine and find peace and joy in their religious belief and worship—enjoyment that is presently lost to them in the chaotic swirl of obsessive-compulsive anxiety. One individual, after recovering from scrupulosity, noted: “I believe I’m more loyal now [to God] than I’ve ever been, it’s just manifested in the correct and healthy actions and feelings.”

With OCD, the gold standard in psychotherapy treatment involves more than just talk therapy; it is an active therapy process that generally involves cognitive work as well as exposure and response prevention both in the therapy sessions and at home between sessions. Research has found treatment to be effective with scrupulosity. Because the problem is an anxiety problem, not a religious problem, both approaches address learning to tolerate the uncertainty caused by the individual’s own anxiety. One individual reflected on the importance of this principle in his recovery: “Perhaps the most important thing in my recovery was developing a tolerance for uncertainty. I had developed scrupulosity out of a need for control and in order to recover I needed to let go of that control. I had to be willing to believe I was wrong with no logical explanation or understanding of why or how. I would now refer to this as faith, though at the time it felt like sinning to me.”

Cognitive therapy helps individuals identify problematic assumptions and thinking patterns and challenges the truthfulness of those thoughts, which helps to create cognitive flexibility. It addresses such topics as thought control, inflated sense of responsibility, overestimation of threat, intolerance of uncertainty, and the like. One individual, treated with cognitive therapy, said of his life after recovery, “Now that I have the skills I do, I feel a new power in my life that I never quite had before. I am much more aware of how my brain works and I can detect when scrupulosity and OCD are speaking, and because of this ability, I can dismiss those thoughts for thoughts of...”
actual truth. As soon as I can dispute obsessive thoughts, anxiety and stress soon begin to die down and I can reorganize my thinking pattern to be more healthy.”

Exposure therapy provides experiences that allow the individual to confront the thing they fear the most: their own anxiety. One individual reflected, “One of the most important aspects to my recovery was formal psychotherapy (exposure therapy) and, alongside that, coming to the realization that I was not sinning by doing so. The second point was important so that I could wholeheartedly do my exposures; otherwise, I would have not gotten the results I was able to get.”

As the scrupulous individual faces their anxiety, several things occur. First, they learn they can indeed tolerate anxiety that presently feels unbearable; that although anxiety is uncomfortable, it is not dangerous. Second, they learn that if they don’t use escape or avoidance to shield themselves from their anxiety, it can go away on its own without them doing anything to try to make it go away. Third, as they learn these things, they gain more confidence in their own ability to cope. That confidence then encourages continued healthy thoughts and behaviors that help the student break the compulsive cycle and continue to move forward to health.

One individual shared this about his recovery:

Not only do I feel like I have come out as a whole person, but I also feel like I have discovered and learned valuable lessons about myself, mental health, and the gospel of Jesus Christ as scrupulosity, in my context, was closely connected to my faith. I feel far more compassionate now to those who suffer from mental health challenges and I feel a sense of purpose in trying to help with those who suffer in this way. In addition to a greater level of empathy to those who suffer in mind, I also have acquired a healthier perspective on personal progression and what God expects of me. I used to be hyperfocused on perfecting myself, but I now feel a greater trust in God’s ability to do that for me. I am more comfortable with my weaknesses and can see how God’s grace is sufficient. My life after therapy has brought me more joy, a clearer understanding between what is the Spirit and what is my anxiety, an improved and closer relationship to God and my wife, and an enhanced level of gratitude for living.

This individual’s mother also reflected on changes she observed in her college-age son since he had concluded therapy: “His whole concept of Heavenly Father changed. Overall—like a huge weight or burden has been lifted. He seems much more relaxed and at peace with the learning and growing process of life—much more able to be himself. He is openly grateful and joyous of the difference this therapy has made in his life, and the tools and
understanding he feels like he now has to recognize and navigate situations that would’ve previously brought anxiety and distress.”

Summary

A religious concern is not always born from religious content, such as a question about a particular doctrinal position within the Church, a misunderstanding of how to apply particular doctrines, or adaptive guilt resulting from sin. As this article has extensively discussed and illustrated, at times religious concern is born from highly toxic, poorly regulated anxiety. This anxiety can hijack a student’s religious belief and worship. Religion then becomes a source of deep suffering rather than providing peace and light. Individuals are highly motivated to resolve their concerns but become trapped in an obsessive-compulsive cycle of unwanted intrusive thoughts about moral and religious doubts and fears, along with enacting compulsions such as reassurance-seeking and confession. This obsessive-compulsive cycle limits their ability to resolve their concerns without seeking out professional mental health intervention. Religious educators, as those on the front line with students, have the opportunity to identify these students. Educating the student about toxic anxiety, and referring them to their parents, ecclesiastical leader, and a trained mental health professional, takes a comprehensive approach to treating the debilitating anxiety so they can find the therapeutic relief they so desperately crave—finding joy again in living the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Notes

38. Bible Dictionary, s.v. “Confession.”
47. For characteristics of scrupulosity contrasted with tenets of pure religion, see “Understanding Scrupulosity (Religious OCD),” chart, *Ensign*, September 2019.
50. It is helpful to note for someone with scrupulosity that Alma’s sins were not minor sins that tend to occur in the course of daily living as an imperfect mortal. In addition, they were not just inadvertent, possible sins, or moments when Alma may have questioned whether his motives were 100 percent pure. Alma’s sins were blatant, purposeful sins (see Alma 36:12–22; Alma 38:7). In fact, he and his friends were called “the very vilest of sinners” (Mosiah 28:4). Even still, “the Lord saw fit in his infinite mercy to spare them” (Mosiah 28:4).


Our personal perceptions of “the character, perfections, and attributes of God” have subtle and yet powerful influences on how we live our lives.
Sinners in the Hands of the Unknown God

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Many readers will recognize the title of this article as a merging of phrases from two well-known sermons in Christian history. The first five words of the title come from Reverend Jonathan Edwards’s eighteenth-century sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” The last three words form a phrase from the testimony of the Apostle Paul to the ancient Athenians wherein he spoke of “THE UNKNOWN GOD” (Acts 17:23).

My purpose in writing this article is to explain how different scriptural, doctrinal, and cultural characterizations of God can influence faith in God—positively and negatively. Specifically, I will include contrasts between Reverend Edwards’s “angry God” and the Apostle Paul’s “God of patience and consolation” (Romans 15:5). A major part of this article will also discuss the character of God described in the scriptures of the restored gospel, “a perfect,
just God, and a merciful God also” (Alma 42:15), who does “all things for the welfare and happiness of his people” (Helaman 12:2).

The Nature of God

Jonathan Edwards (1703–58), a colonial America pastor who became the president of what would later be known as Princeton University, penned and preached “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” on July 8, 1741. Edwards intended to awaken the parishioners of his Enfield, Connecticut, congregation to the reality of their depravity and need for redemption. The “Enfield Sermon,” as Reverend Edwards’s discourse is known in scholarly circles, includes the following description of Diety as “the God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours.”

While this statement provides graphic evidence of Edwards’s belief in God’s “fiery indignation” (Hebrews 10:27), a careful study of the corpus of his writings reveals a pastor and theologian who passionately believed that God’s justice was a manifestation of his love for his children. Reverend Edwards’s dramatic expressions of God’s anger were his way of inviting his parishioners to see their depravity and desperate need for the grace of Christ (the Lord’s words in Doctrine and Covenants 19:7 denote a similar strategy). The majority of Edwards’s sermons include forceful arguments against sin and and the doctrine of universal salvation. His ministry has been identified as a major influence in the First Great Awakening, a period of time that Latter-day Saint scholars have recognized as having helped prepare people’s hearts and minds for the Restoration of the gospel through the Prophet Joseph Smith.

The Apostle Paul’s testimony before the Athenian elite is considered a landmark sermon and one of the most significant discourses of his ministry. In the Acts of the Apostles, we read that as Paul first entered Athens, “his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry” (Acts 17:16; emphasis added). From his writings, it appears that the idolatry that most concerned Paul wasn’t the worship of the carved idols that lined the streets and filled the temples of Athens but that “the Athenians and strangers . . . spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new
thing” (Acts 17:21). Paul’s greater concern appears to be the acceptance the Athenians, and those who were coming to the city to be educated, were giving the philosophical and religious traditions their idols represented. Paul specifically mentions encounters with “certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks” (Acts 17:18). Epicurean philosophers emphasized that “the supreme good is pleasure,” and the Stoics stressed the “ideal of being imperturbable” (always composed). One Latter-day Saint described how the philosophy of stoicism had influenced his understanding of the character of God: “I thought of [God] as a stoic gatekeeper. To me he was someone who claimed to love but never expressed his love, or at least not to me. There were plenty of people around me who claimed to feel his love for them. I felt like while others around me could earn his love, I was not good enough. . . . I wanted to believe in a God who is not constantly angry with the shortcomings of his children. . . . but I just couldn’t.” This young man’s “stoic” belief system would later be identified as being a part of his challenges with a mental disorder that psychologists have termed “scrupulosity,” a form of obsessive-compulsive behavior often manifest in religious practices. I will return to his story later.

When the Apostle Paul was taken before the leading “men of Athens” (Acts 17:22) to provide greater detail about what is described as “new doctrine” (Acts 17:19) concerning “Jesus, and the resurrection” (Acts 17:18), he stated, “Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you” (Acts 17:22–23). Some of the Athenians may have understood Paul’s words “too superstitious” as a commendation for their zealous worship. Others may have taken Paul’s counsel as a rebuke for being “overly scrupulous, even [irrational], in their religious observance.” What is clear is the fact that Paul, acting in his calling as an Apostle, was testifying of the divinity, necessity, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and of the Savior’s identity as “the unknown God.” The Joseph Smith Translation of these verses includes Paul’s invitation to the Athenians to “seek the Lord, if they [were] willing to find him” (JST, Acts 17:27, footnote).

Just as the testimonies of latter-day Apostles elicit varied responses in our day, Paul’s apostolic witness to the Athenians brought a mixed reaction. Some called him a “babbler” (Acts 17:18) and “mocked” (Acts 17:32) him. Others were willing to “hear [him] again” (Acts 17:32), perhaps indicating that
they were intrigued by what Paul was teaching. The scriptural account also includes the names of others who “ clave unto him” (Acts 17:34), suggesting there were those who accepted Paul’s testimony and followed his direction.

Even though the inhabitants of ancient Athens were clearly different in many ways from those who lived in Jonathan Edwards’s colonial America, a common teaching for both groups of people was the belief that “God’s purpose in all that he does is to bring honor to himself.” The doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is that God’s motives, as described in the scriptures and teachings of the Restoration, are not focused on adding to his own glory, but his “work and . . . glory [is] to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39).

**What Is the Character of God?**

Katherine Patterson’s book *Bridge to Terabithia* includes a meaningful contrast between two different characterizations of God as the author describes a conversation between two adolescents growing up in rural Virginia. The first character, Jess, is a shy and insecure young man who is from a poor, fundamentalist Christian family. His friend Leslie is secure and confident but has little if any religious training. One of the chapters in *Bridge to Terabithia* describes an experience the friends share when Leslie attends the annual Church Easter service with Jess and his family. The following dialogue ensues between Leslie, Jess, and Jess’s younger sister May Belle as they return home from attending the Easter worship service. Leslie begins the conversation with her comments on the service they have just attended:

> “Gee, I’m really glad I came.”  
> Jess turned to Leslie in unbelief.  
> “It was better than a movie.”  
> “You’re kidding.”  
> “No, I’m not.” . . . “That whole Jesus thing is really interesting, isn’t it?”  
> “What d’you mean?”  
> “All those people wanting to kill him when he hadn’t done anything to hurt them.” She hesitated. “It’s really kind of a beautiful story—like Abraham Lincoln or Socrates—or Aslan.”  
> “It ain’t beautiful,” May Belle broke in. “It’s scary. Nailing holes right through somebody’s hand.”  
> “May Belle’s right,” Jess [responded]. “It’s because we’re all vile sinners God made Jesus die.”  
> “Do you think that’s true?”  
> He was shocked. “It’s in the Bible, Leslie.”
She looked at him as if she were going to argue, then seemed to change her mind. “It’s crazy, isn’t it?” She shook her head. “You have to believe it, but you hate it. I don’t have to believe it, and I think it’s beautiful.” She shook her head again. “It’s crazy.”

May Belle had her eyes all squinted as though Leslie was some strange creature in a zoo. “You gotta believe the Bible, Leslie.”

“Why?” It was a genuine question. Leslie wasn’t being smarty.

“Cause if you don’t believe the Bible, . . . God’ll damn you to hell when you die.”

“Where’d she ever hear a thing like that?” . . .

“That’s right, ain’t it, Jess?” May Belle’s shrill voice demanded. “Don’t God damn you to hell if you don’t believe the Bible?”

Jess pushed his hair out of his face. “I reckon,” he muttered.

“I don’t believe it,” Leslie said. “I don’t even think you’ve read the Bible.”

“I read most of it.” . . . “About the only book we got around our place.” He looked up at Leslie and half grinned.

She smiled. “OK,” she said. “But I still don’t think God goes around damning people to hell.”

They smiled at each other trying to ignore May Belle’s anxious little voice. “But Leslie,” she insisted. “What if you die? What’s going to happen to you if you die?”

Peter Enns, a professor of biblical studies and the author of the thought-provoking book *The Sin of Certainty*, makes the following autobiographical comment concerning his experience with this instructive dialogue between Jess, Leslie, and May Belle, which led him to question his own understanding of the character of God: “Jess’s God was my default God, but Leslie’s God was the one I, deep down, wanted to believe in. My inner May Belle reacted quickly—an aggressive panicked voice scolded me for slipping off the rails. After all, I wasn’t calling into question some side issue of faith, like whether God wants me to give up chocolate or coffee for Lent, but a central question—perhaps the central question—What is God like?”

Whether it is an explicit belief or a tacit understanding, each of us has, or is in the process of developing, a sense of who we believe God to be. Some understand God to be loving and forgiving, others focus more on a God of justice and judgment, and still others have lost faith in God altogether, being unable to reconcile their cognitive and spiritual dissonance.

Our personal perceptions of “the character, perfections, and attributes of God”12 have subtle and yet powerful influences on how we live our lives. Professor Richard Rice has written, “Our understanding of God has enormous practical significance. . . . What we think of God and how we respond to him are closely related. An inaccurate view of God can have disastrous effects on personal religious experience. We could never love a hostile, tyrannical being. . . . And we could not respect a mild, indulgent figure who never
took us seriously. Our personal religious experience can be healthy only if we hold an adequate conception of God.”

Not only can a distorted view of God have a disastrous influence on our personal religious life, as Professor Rice suggested, but belief in a caricature of God, which in essence is a false god, can be especially destructive in interpersonal relationships. Conversely, to understand our personal and family identities, it is vital to understand God as he really is.

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “It is necessary for us to have an understanding of God himself in the beginning. If we start right, it is easy to go right all the time; but if we start wrong, we may go wrong, and it will be a hard matter to get right. There are but a very few beings in the world who understand rightly the character of God. . . . If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves. . . . It is the first principle of the Gospel, to know for a certainty the character of God.”

President Heber C. Kimball, a counselor in the First Presidency to Brigham Young, described several attributes of God: “I am perfectly satisfied that my Father and my God is a cheerful, pleasant, lively, good-natured Being. Why? Because I am cheerful, pleasant, lively, and good-natured when I have His Spirit. That is one reason why I know; and another is—the Lord said, through Joseph Smith, ‘I delight in a glad heart and a cheerful countenance.’ That arises from the perfection of His attributes; He is a jovial, lively person, and a beautiful man.” Kimball’s description echoes the words of the prophet Enoch, who described God as “merciful and kind forever” (Moses 7:30).

Heber C. Kimball’s words provide a dramatic contrast to the description offered by Professor Richard Dawkins: “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser.” Or, as A. A. Milne observed, “The Old Testament is responsible for more atheism, agnosticism, disbelief—call it what you will—than any book ever written: It has emptied more churches than all the counter-attractions of cinema, motor bicycle, and golf-course.”

The disparity between the statements of Heber C. Kimball and Richard Dawkins represents the wide gulf that exists concerning the character and caricatures of God. Believing in the caricatures of God are why some among us have lost faith. Learning to truly know God is “life eternal” (John 17:3).

While it isn’t my intention to provide an exhaustive reconciliation of what appears to be the angry God of the Hebrew Bible with the loving Christ
found in the New Testament, the following discussion is intended to provide additional insights that will strengthen faith in our Father in Heaven, in his Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Church and the gospel that bear his name.

**Deepening Our Relationships with God**

Sigmund Freud argued God to be a dysfunctional illusion that is simply a “projection” of a “need” for a powerful father figure, but research evidence clearly demonstrates that the understanding we have of the existence of God, his character, and the nature of our relationship with him, is related to our mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Those with a “secure relationship with God” score higher on measures of mental health than individuals whose relationship with God is tenuous. The research literature on “attachment to God” also suggests that individuals with unreliable or unstable relationships with their parents are able to compensate for less-than-nurturing relationships with their parents by developing an intimate relationship with God. Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught, “When we are perplexed and stressed, explanatory help is not always immediately forthcoming, but compensatory help will be. Thus our process of cognition gives way to our personal submission, as we experience those moments when we learn to ‘be still, and know that I am God’ (Ps. 46:10).”

Only hours before his crucifixion, Jesus Christ offered what has come to be known as the “Intercessory Prayer” to his Father on behalf of his disciples and all others who would “believe on [him] through their word” (John 17:20). A variation of this idea is also found in the Savior’s words to Joseph Smith as recorded in section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants:

> And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent. (John 17:3)

> This is eternal lives—to know the only wise and true God, and Jesus Christ, whom he hath sent. I am he. Receive ye, therefore, my law. (Doctrine and Covenants 132:24)

Both texts underscore the importance of coming to know God, but the Lord’s words in the Doctrine and Covenants, “eternal lives” (please note the plural), remind us that coming to know God has temporal and eternal significance for us as individuals and for the lives of those we love. For me, “eternal lives” centers on the eternal implications of my relationship with my family.
Authoritarian or Authoritative, Permissive or Supportive?

Research literature demonstrates that there is a correspondence between our relationship with God and the kind of relationships we have with our earthly mothers and fathers. Put another way, parent-child interactions are influenced by how we perceive our Heavenly Father treats us. Thus it is vital to model positive, authoritative, and supportive parenting and reject parenting styles that are authoritarian or permissive.

The authoritative parent is loving, sets reasonable expectations, follows through with consequences, sets boundaries, and is also warm, kind, and open to negotiation. Their focus is on the development of the child. The authoritarian parent is coercive and hostile, shaming, demeaning, controlling, rigid, nonnegotiating, and focused on their own needs. The permissive parent is indulgent and often neglectful. They refrain from setting boundaries or having structure, expect little responsibility, and have few, if any, consequences for negative behavior.

The supportive parent, like the authoritative parent, focuses on the growth of the child. The supportive parent encourages a child to discover their own strengths, is forgiving and gracious, and allows the child to make mistakes without berating them when they do.

A recent study conducted by BYU professors of Church history and doctrine Justin Dyer and Michael Goodman and two of their students, Cassidy Ogletree and Sharlene Nauta, concludes, “If God is viewed as disfavoring the person, being neglectful of the person, or even as punishing the person, authoritarian parenting may further degrade the individual’s sense of self, leading to an increase in suicide risk.” A growing number of studies reveal that “young people growing up in families characterized by authoritarian and permissive behavior, establish insecure emotional relationships, . . . which in turn, could be a risk factor for suicidal ideation.”

The relationships between authoritarianism, permissiveness, and suicide are becoming increasingly important for Latter-day Saints. The United States Center for Disease Control recently reported that suicide was the third leading cause of death in the United States in 2015 for children ages 10–14. Suicide rates have been noted to be especially high in the Intermountain West, with Utah being reported to have the seventh highest suicide rate for teenagers in the nation. While research studies also reveal that the suicide rate for young men who were active in the Church is significantly lower than for those young men who were not active or who were not members of the
Church, any suicide, and the associated trauma, is sobering and deserving of our best preventative efforts. These data underscore the importance of understanding the true nature of God as being neither authoritarian nor permissive, thus helping us emulate him in our roles as parents and in other roles of leadership we are asked to assume.

President Ezra Taft Benson once taught, “Whenever the God of heaven reveals His gospel to mankind, Satan, the archenemy to Christ, introduces a counterfeit.” Acting in an authoritarian manner in any capacity is a distortion of what it means to act in an authoritative manner. Conversely, being permissive is a distortion of being supportive in our relationships with others.

Authoritarian parents and authoritarian leaders of many religious traditions have used the caricature of an authoritarian god to justify their abusive beliefs and practices. In 1994 leaders of the Hutu tribe in Rwanda, Africa, some of whom were members of the clergy, cited the following biblical text from 1 Samuel 15 to justify the extermination of members of the Tutsi tribe: “Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass” (1 Samuel 15:3). One pastor compared the Tutsis to the ancient Amalekites and warned that like Saul, the Hutu people would also be rejected by God if they did not exterminate all of the Tutsis. He preached, “If you don’t exterminate the Tutsis, you’ll be rejected. If you don’t want to be rejected by God, then finish the job of killing the people God has rejected. No child, no wife, no old man should be left alive.” It has been estimated that approximately eight hundred thousand Rwandan lives were taken in one of the largest genocides in recent history.

The Rwandan genocide begs the question concerning the legitimacy of the biblical text and its wider application in our lives today—can we believe in a God who gives commands that contradict our own sense of right and wrong? What do we do when our own beliefs, or the beliefs of those we love, contradict the teachings of God found in scripture or in the words of his latter-day servants?

In the October 2009 general conference, Elder Dallin H. Oaks provided the following illustration: “If an adult child is living in cohabitation, does the seriousness of sexual relations outside the bonds of marriage require that this child feel the full weight of family disapproval by being excluded from any family contacts, or does parental love require that the fact of cohabitation be ignored? I have seen both of these extremes, and I believe that both are...
Elder Oaks continued by wisely counseling that the details of how a parent should respond in such a situation “is a matter for parental wisdom, guided by the inspiration of the Lord.” It is important to note that Elder Oaks warned that both excluding the family member and ignoring their actions are “extremes” that are “inappropriate.”

Case Study

While more research has been done on authoritarian relationships, permissive perspectives and practices have also been reported to have negative outcomes with respect to faith, family, and mental health, including suicidal ideation. The late Dr. Carlfred Broderick, a Latter-day Saint professor of marriage and family therapy at the University of Southern California, provided an interesting illustration of authoritarian parenting in his book *My Parents Married on a Dare*, from which I will illustrate the hazards of both authoritarian and permissive relationships.

Dr. Broderick’s illustration begins with his referring a Latter-day Saint family to a Jewish colleague for family therapy. After encountering resistance from the parents to his counsel to “lighten up a little” with their rebellious teenage daughter, the therapist sought Dr. Broderick’s counsel. “Every time I suggest any movement in the direction of loosening up,” the therapist observed, “they [the parents] patiently explain to me that I just don’t understand their religious obligation, as Mormon parents, to keep this kid in line. Frankly, I don’t know how to deal with this. I don’t want to attack their religious beliefs, but the situation is explosive.”

After some discussion, Dr. Broderick suggested a particular strategy wherein the therapist would express interest in the family’s religious beliefs, specifically what he termed “the war in heaven.” The therapist followed the suggestion and called sometime later in wonderment at how well Dr. Broderick’s counsel had worked. Dr. Broderick’s colleague indicated that even the rebellious teen had offered to share with him a copy of a book about their faith with a picture of their family in the front. The therapist was most surprised with the mother’s dramatic change. After describing how the mother had responded quickly at the opportunity of sharing her beliefs about the war in heaven, her enthusiasm came to an end as quickly as it had started.

Dr. Broderick’s colleague described what happened as follows: “In seconds she [the mother] had launched into some story about a council in heaven and two plans and she gets about three minutes into it and she stops cold in
her tracks and gives me a funny look and says, ‘All right, Doctor, you’ve made your point.’ From that moment on they were like putty in my hands. It was like magic. Carl, what is this war in heaven?’ The mother had obviously come to the realization that what she was doing in the name of her religion to influence her daughter’s behavior was similar to the strategy designed by the adversary to enslave humankind. With some similarity to how Satan was attempting to “destroy the agency of man” (Moses 4:3), she, too, was attempting to destroy the agency of her daughter by forcing her to follow her mother’s expectations.

While many, if not most, Latter-day Saints understand Satan’s plan was to selfishly “force” the children of God to do right, Robert J. Matthews, former dean of Religious Education at BYU, described Lucifer’s plan differently. Dean Matthews observed the following:

> It seems strange to me that a third of all the spirits that had the potential to be born into this world would have favored a plan based on forced obedience. Most of us do not like to be forced. As I see it, the real issue was not so much one of force as it was that Lucifer said he would guarantee salvation for his spirit brothers and sisters. He promised salvation without excellence, without effort, without hard work, without individual responsibility. That is the lie he promulgated in the preearth councils. That so-called shortcut to salvation captivated many gullible and lazy spirits. They wanted something for nothing.

There are many on the earth who have lost their agency by indulging themselves, and by being indulged, in unworthy practices. I believe that Lucifer’s plan to “destroy the agency of man” (Moses 4:3) was more permissive than it was authoritarian. His plan was similar to Nehor’s argument that “all mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble, but that they might lift up their heads and rejoice; for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life” (Alma 1:4).

Whether Lucifer’s plan was one of authoritarian power, permissive indulgence, or both, the scriptures plainly teach that the adversary was and is “a liar from the beginning” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:25) and that he “will not support his children at the last day, but doth speedily drag them down to hell” (Alma 30:60) by any means possible.
Advocacy and Mentoring

It is often in relationships with other mortals that we experience God’s love and deepen our understanding of his character, perfections, and attributes. The prophet Lehi acknowledged that his son Jacob had “suffered afflictions and much sorrow, because of the rudeness of [his] brethren” but also promised him, “Thou shalt dwell safely with thy brother, Nephi” (2 Nephi 2:1, 3).

While I value the theoretical and clinical training I received in graduate school and I’m grateful for the experiences I had with fellow students, faculty, staff, and others, the experience I treasure the most occurred during the very last hour of my formal graduate school experience. In my particular discipline, doctoral students were required to conduct original research, formally write up their study, and then defend their work before an examination committee. The results of this exam determined whether the candidate would pass or fail.

The first fifteen minutes of the two-hour examination went quite smoothly. The questions were straightforward, and I felt I answered them well. I began to feel the confidence that comes with completing a long-term goal. The next set of questions, however, was more difficult as we began to discuss some of the more controversial details of my work concerning the place of moral agency in psychotherapy. Even though I was feeling confident in how the defense was proceeding and realized that I would need to make some revisions to what I had written, I wasn’t prepared for what happened next. The chair of the examination committee suddenly voiced his feelings that he wasn’t happy with the overall scope of my study and didn’t know if he could give me a passing vote. After several more attempts to defend my work, I realized that I didn’t have the ability to adequately respond to his objections—and what he was saying appeared to be influencing the other members of the examination committee. I began to lose hope.

At that critical moment, Professor Richard Nephi Williams, a member of my doctoral committee, asked the examination committee if he could make a few comments. For the next twenty minutes Professor Williams defended my work, and he defended me. The attitude in the room changed dramatically. Differences were reconciled, a vote was taken, and I passed the examination and graduated with a degree that has blessed my life in ways I couldn’t have anticipated.

I hope everyone at some point in their lives has someone stand up for them, plead their cause, and save them as Professor Williams saved me. This experience helped me understand in a very personal way what is meant in
scripture when Jesus Christ is referred to as our “advocate with the Father” (Doctrine and Covenants 110:4; JST, 1 John 2:1).

There are, however, at least two major doctrinal differences in the ways Professor Williams blessed my life and how the Savior is my advocate. Both of these doctrinal points help us to better understand the character of God and the kind of men and women he would have us be. One of these points is emphasized by section 45 of the Doctrine and Covenants: “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; wherefore, Father, spare these my brethren that believe on my name, that they may come unto me and have everlasting life” (Doctrine and Covenants 45:3–5; emphasis added). Professor Williams defended me based on the strength of my work and his faith in me; the Savior’s advocacy at my judgment is based on the efficacy of his atoning sacrifice and my faith in him. Our happiness in this life and salvation in the next is more about him than it is about us.

The young man I mentioned earlier who was struggling with scrupulosity wrote the following description of how he began to understand the significance and meaning of the grace of Christ: “My first experience understanding grace came during the beginning months of my mission when confessing to my mission president. He taught me that ‘grace, by definition, is undeserved.’ I never before thought that I could gain [or even ask] something from God that I did not deserve.”

The prophet Lehi was teaching his son Jacob a similar lesson when he recorded, “I know that thou art redeemed, because of the righteousness of thy Redeemer” (2 Nephi 2:3; emphasis added). Both Jacob’s redemption and the young missionary’s healing were less about their own good works, and more about the redemptive and strengthening blessings of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

Human Depravity and the God of Love

Another important doctrinal difference between Professor Williams being my advocate and the Savior “pleading my cause before . . . [the Father]” has to do with the character and intentions of God. While I can’t be certain of the motives of the members of my examination committee, I know that my Father in Heaven does not see me, in the words of Charles Spurgeon, as “a
lump of unworthiness, a mass of corruption, and a heap of sin” unworthy of his love and forgiveness. Reverend Spurgeon’s description of “sinful man” is a reflection of the belief many have in the doctrine of original sin, which includes the idea that, “all humans alive at any given time (with the exception of . . . Jesus Christ) are included in a ‘mass of perdition’ and are altogether guilty and damned by God on account of Adam’s primal sin.” Terryl Givens stated, “Repudiation of original sin is perhaps the earliest major divergence from creedal Christian doctrine . . . that Mormonism unambiguously asserts.” Prophets, both ancient and modern, have taught that while humankind is “fallen” (Alma 22:12) and that we can become an “enemy to God” (Mosiah 3:19), each child is “innocent before God” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:38) at the time he or she is born. As Latter-day Saints we reject the doctrines of human depravity and the characterization of a god who is tyrannical, retributive, and in need of being appeased.

Roberta Bondi, professor emerita of church history at Candler School of Theology, has written the following account of her experience attending religious revivals each summer as a child, a remembrance that provides a sobering description of the consequences of believing in human depravity: “The goal of the revival was to create or revive in everybody the three-fold conviction that each of us was so rotten to the core that we deserved to die and roast in hell forever; that God was enraged at us enough to kill us; and finally, that in spite of everything, God loved us enough to rescue us by sending his son as a sacrifice to die in our place.”

Professor Bondi continued her description by explaining that even though she was invited to believe in Christ as a child, she had also learned to fear God in a way that evoked feelings of shame and self-loathing that, in her words, “consumes you with anger, that renders you passive, that swallows you in depression, that keeps you from loving and being loved.” Contrast Professor Bondi’s story with the following account from Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles:

I make my own heartfelt declaration of God our Eternal Father . . . because some in the contemporary world suffer from a distressing misconception of Him. Among these there is a tendency to feel distant from the Father, even estranged from Him, if they believe in Him at all. And if they do believe, many moderns say they might feel comfortable in the arms of Jesus, but they are uneasy contemplating the stern encounter of God . . . . I bear personal witness this day of a personal, living God, who knows our names, hears and answers prayers, and cherishes us eternally as children of His spirit. I testify that amidst the wondrously complex tasks inherent in the universe, He seeks our individual happiness and safety above all other godly concerns.
We are created in His very image and likeness, and Jesus of Nazareth, His Only Begotten Son in the flesh, came to earth as the perfect mortal manifestation of His grandeur.41

Conclusion

Jonathan Edwards spoke at length of a god who inspired the doctrine of original sin. The Apostle Paul came to understand that “the unknown God” acknowledged by the Athenians was Jesus Christ, but only after spending much of his life worshipping the right God in the wrong way. One of the major conclusions I am able to make from a lifetime of studying the relationships between religious belief, practice, and mental health is that many of the personal and interpersonal problems with which people of faith wrestle, including members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, are found in a misunderstanding of the character of God and the extremes of religious belief and practice these misperceptions often support. C. S. Lewis once said, “He [the devil] always sends errors into the world in pairs—pairs of opposites. And he always encourages us to spend a lot of time thinking which is the worse. You see why, of course? He relies on your extra dislike of the one error to draw you gradually into the opposite one.”44

The God re-revealed to humankind through the Prophet Joseph Smith is authoritative and just, but not authoritarian, nor vengeful. He is supportive and merciful, but not permissive or indulgent. If he was to change from merciful to indulgent or from just to vengeful, or some combination of both counterfeits, he would, in Alma’s words, “cease to be God” (Alma 42:25).

A dear friend recently shared a story of a time in her life when she experienced so much adversity that, in her words, she “was stretched repeatedly nearly to the breaking point.” It was during these dark days that she was asked by a friend, “How can you trust a God who would let all of these hard things happen to you?” Her answer is profound:

I didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t that I had never been angry with God or struggled to understand what was going on in my life, but I did trust him. I had just never had to explain why in words. So I telegraphed a silent prayer and opened my mouth. The words I heard myself say have been a blessing to me ever since. “No, you don’t understand,” I said. “That’s WHY I trust him! What good would a god be who would just hand me back my own categories about myself and settle for what I think I can be? My God knows who I can be and, even when it’s going to hurt like the devil to get there, he doesn’t flinch. . . . He is not drawn off by my pain or my anger or my tears. That is why I trust him.”41
The prophet Mormon taught, “He changeth not; if so he would cease to be God” (Mormon 9:19). In the following quotation, C. S. Lewis describes the complimentary nature of God’s attributes of justice and mercy: “The Humanitarian theory wants simply to abolish justice and substitute mercy for it. Mercy, detached from justice, grows unmerciful. That is the important paradox. As there are plants which will flourish only in mountain soil, so it appears that mercy will flower only when it grows in the crannies of the rock of justice: transplanted to the marshlands of mere Humanitarianism, it becomes a man-eating weed, all the more dangerous because it is still called by the same name as the mountain variety.”

Understanding that “God’s anger and His wrath are not a contradiction of His love but an evidence of [it]” helps us understand some of the more difficult passages in scripture that describe what appears to be a god of vengeance. C. S. Lewis wrote the following in a letter to an individual who had asked about Lewis’s views on the inerrancy of scripture and the vengeance of God: “The ultimate question [Lewis wrote] is whether the doctrine of the goodness of God or that of the inerrancy of scripture is to prevail when they conflict. I think the doctrine of the goodness of God is the more certain of the two. Indeed, only that doctrine renders this worship of him obligatory or even permissible.”

Elder Holland has observed that some of the harsh descriptions of God found in the Bible come “through a misreading (and surely, in some cases, a mistranslation) of the [text].” Elder Holland has also suggested that “one of the remarkable contributions of the Book of Mormon is its seamless, perfectly consistent view of divinity” where there is “no misreading of the God who is urgently, lovingly, faithfully at work on every page of that record . . . to give the world back its Bible and a correct view of Deity with it.” The young man I quoted earlier, who expressed difficulty feeling the love of God, shared the following as being one of the most important things he did to help him work through his personal challenges understanding the true nature of God and overcoming his obsessive-compulsive religious beliefs and practices:

I started to study the Book of Mormon with the intent to understand God’s love and to truly believe that he loved me. I also began to pray as a way to develop a relationship with God and as a way to [seek] for healing from heaven. Over [time] I was able to gain an understanding that God was not, as I once heard him described, “the big mean kid in the sky with a magnifying glass,” but that he was truly a loving God. [My] study [of the Book of Mormon] had an enormous benefit on my mental health and my understanding of God’s loving personality.
The gospel of Jesus Christ as restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith, and the Savior’s servants who have followed, allows us to have hope that even though we do not “know the meaning of all things,” we can “know that [God] loveth his children” (1 Nephi 11:117) and that he does “all things for the welfare and happiness of his people” (Helaman 12:2). A correct understanding of the character of God is one of the “plain and most precious” (1 Nephi 13:26) truths we can come to know as we strive to love and serve God and our neighbors.

Notes

7. Personal correspondence with the author, August 2016.
35. Broderick, *My Parents Married on a Dare*, 89.
37. Correspondence with the author, August 2016.
42. Bondi, *Memories of God*, 144.
44. C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (New York City: HarperOne, 2001), 186.
45. Personal correspondence with the author, April 2, 2018.
50. Correspondance with the author, August 2016.
Every relationship that grows out of learning that is motivated by love, that focuses on worthy content, and that relies on uplifting methods results in an increase of love among learners, between learner and teacher, and between learner and God.
While teaching an instructional design course, I would often begin the semester by asking students to define the word *learning*. On the surface, that seems like a relatively simple task, but most students struggled to craft a definition that satisfied them. We would then explore scholarly definitions of the word, often with equally unsatisfying results. Scholars in the fields of education and psychology usually focus on three primary aspects of the word *learning*: (1) the acquisition of new knowledge or a new skill (2) that persists over time and (3) is not due only to growth and development.¹

The kind of learning that has eternal consequences and leads to God is so much more than traditional definitions of learning would suggest. At its core, it requires learners to exercise agency and faith—and teachers to help students become agents rather than objects in the learning process. Such sacred learning requires both learners and teachers to act out of love for God. Consequently, it produces powerful relationships between learners and teachers as well as between learners and teachers and God. And while those who engage in sacred learning and teaching in this way are completely dependent on God, they become much less dependent on manuals and earthly teachers.
Above all, such consequential learning is driven by a desire to become closer to God and is focused on that outcome.

The definitions of learning that form the basis of disciplines in education and psychology leave almost no room for the role that agency plays in learning. It is almost as if the definitions assume that the one who teaches is the one who decides what will be learned. However, anyone who has taught for an extended period of time knows that the student’s desire to learn holds much more sway than the teacher’s desire to teach. Learning demands the exercise of agency—both for the teacher and for the student. The student needs to act on what is being taught, and the teacher needs to make certain that the student’s agency is being honored (see 2 Nephi 2:26).

Learning in the gospel sense means more than the acquisition of new knowledge or a new skill, even one that persists over time and is not due only to growth and development. Someone can acquire the skill to lie, steal, or cheat, but we should not call that learning—at least in the gospel sense. One who spends time studying evil has, in one sense, relinquished personal agency. Since we know that God gave us the gift of agency, we also know that he did not give us such a gift so that we could will ourselves over to the adversary. He gave us agency so that we could choose to be like him.

This understanding of agency has vast implications for learning because agency is a godly gift—it is the power to develop godliness, to become like the giver of the gift. In this sense, when we exercise our divine gift of agency to learn, we will draw nearer to God. We will not be held captive in the “hidden darkness” that often hovers secretly around us (see 2 Nephi 3:5). Learning that leads to God will lead away from every force that might hold us back, every distraction that would weaken our resolve. This learning will embolden us, lift us, and bring us closer to the Savior.

Does this mean that we refuse to acknowledge the influence of evil in the world—that we pretend that “all is well in Zion” (2 Nephi 18:21)? Of course not. The prophets are keenly aware of the processes and results of moral decay in our world, else how could they warn us against these troubling trends? But their learning and ours must center on progress toward godliness, and therefore we devote our energies to learning that promotes personal growth, worthy achievements, and wholesome relationships—while remaining informed about the human condition in all its complexity.

Elder David A. Bednar has spoken often about the relationship between agency and learning. He has helped us understand that learning in its highest
sense requires the learner to act rather than waiting to be acted upon by a teacher or some other force. Learning is more than the simple acquisition of new knowledge: “Learning by faith cannot be transferred from an instructor to a student through a lecture, a demonstration, or an experiential exercise; rather, a student must exercise faith and act in order to obtain the knowledge for himself or herself.”

When one thinks of the phrase “act and not be acted upon,” the first thing that might come to mind is to avoid being influenced by the adversary—to be acted upon. But Elder Bednar has made it clear on more than one occasion that learners need to avoid being merely acted upon by teachers as well:

I think we often view the teacher as the disseminator of information, and to a degree that’s true. But what that does is make the members of the class objects that are primarily being acted upon, not agents who are acting. And with moral agency when we act as agents, it invites individual teaching by the power of the Holy Ghost in a powerful way. I believe that the highest manifestation of teaching is inviting learners to act in accordance with the truth that they are learning.

The ultimate goal of gospel learning is to increase our capacity and desire to act in ways that lead to all that is good and true. The more we act in these ways, the closer we come to God. Agency, then, gives us the power to learn what we need to learn to one day “see him as he is” because we have chosen to become “like him” (Moroni 7:48).

We know that “whatever principle of intelligence” we acquire in this life will rise with us in the next life. Learning, therefore, is not an incidental pastime during our mortal existence. It is literally the core purpose for which we came to earth. But we know that not every fact or skill we acquire now will be needed in the eternities. The capacities we are developing in our everyday life, however, will be needed.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell explained this principle as follows: “Our intelligence will rise with us, meaning not simply our I.Q., but our capacity to receive and to apply truth. Our talents, attributes, and skills will rise with us, certainly also our capacity to learn, our degree of self-discipline, and our capacity to work.”

**The Teacher’s Role**

If learning is the central focus, and if the agency of the learner is the most critical part of the equation, what is the role of the teacher? Let me illustrate
with an experience I had when I was serving with my wife as temple president and matron of the Bismarck North Dakota Temple.

When there were no scheduled sessions in the temple, I spent a significant portion of my time helping African refugees who had come to Bismarck to seek employment. During our first few weeks in our new assignment, the missionaries asked that I help them with their investigators who spoke French. One of these families joined the Church. The husband, Freddie, asked if I would help him prepare for licensure as a certified nursing assistant (CNA).

A teacher is normally expected to be an expert in the subject matter. I had no background in anything related to medical professions. So, in the process of helping Freddie prepare for certification as a nursing assistant, we simultaneously learned the content together.

My experience helping Freddie and his wife, Angel, integrate into American culture reminded me that teachers are first and foremost learners. Whether I am asked to teach someone how to become licensed as a CNA or to teach a lesson on the Godhead in Sunday School to fifteen-year-olds, I must prepare. I must become a learner, a seeker of knowledge. I must place myself in the place of the learner, come to understand the learner’s needs, and then learn what I need to learn in order to be of help.

My experience with Freddie and other refugees reminded me of the four aspects of learning that lead to God: motive, content, method, and relationship.

Motive

If we want to draw closer to God, there is ultimately only one motive that should underlie our actions: love. I am speaking of “the pure love of Christ,” as Mormon defines it (Moroni 7:47). Freddie’s motivation to become a CNA was, at least on the surface, to double his income. Some might conclude that his motive was simply to acquire wealth. But underlying his desire to increase the amount in his monthly paycheck was his desire to provide for his young son and his wife, who was expecting their second child. Prior to their arrival in the US, Freddie and Angel had been driven out of their native country, the DR Congo, to Rwanda to Burundi, and finally to Kenya, where they lived in tents with no running water or electricity.

Freddie’s desire to provide for his family was so strong that he enrolled in courses at the local community college while he was working toward certification as a CNA. When he obtained his CNA license, he worked nights so he
could attend school during the day—all the while still struggling to master the English language. Freddie’s devotion to his family was evident whenever we met together for our learning sessions. Freddie reminded me of the importance of motives. He was not being acted upon. He was clearly acting out of love for his family to learn what he needed to learn so that he could provide for the most important people in his life—his family.

Freddie’s determination grew out of the love he had for his family. One of life’s constant challenges is to increase our capacity to love. The greater our capacity to love, the greater our capacity to exercise our agency. This explains why our motives for learning—and for everything else we do in life—are so crucial to our eternal happiness. The more we learn out of love, the greater our power to choose as God wants us to choose.

Content

The aim of gospel learning is clearly to help us draw closer to God. But learning that leads to God can take many forms. The content might be the words of ancient and modern prophets, but it might also be the content that Freddie and I were learning so that he could become a CNA. As J. Reuben Clark Jr., former member of the First Presidency, once said, “He who invades the domain of knowledge must approach it as Moses came to the burning bush. He stands on holy ground; he would acquire things sacred. We must come to this quest of truth—in all regions of human knowledge whatsoever, not only in reverence, but with a spirit of worship.”

President Clark helps us understand that truth in all its forms can draw us closer to God. My father had Parkinson’s disease for the final twenty-two years of his life. During those years he developed an interest in straw flowers. He would order new varieties of the flowers every year, plant them in his yard, and then hang them upside down to dry from the roof of his garage. Once dried, he cut the stems off and then carefully replaced each stem with a green wire to support the dried bloom. Finally, he would place the blooms, arrange them in small baskets, and then donate or sell them to doctors and dentists who gave them to their patients.

I remember watching him thread the wires into the blooms one evening. His hands began trembling from the Parkinson’s disease, and then—what seemed quite miraculous—his hands became steady enough to perform the fine-motor task of piercing the center of the fragile dried bloom with the end
of the green wire—one bloom after another, hour after hour. He called his flower creations Everlasting Beauty.

My father was learning about straw flowers—how to grow, dry, preserve, and arrange them. He was learning about the possibilities and limitations of his own physical body. He was learning about the value of being productive in spite of his disease. In Elder Maxwell’s terms, my father was developing his capacity to love, to be patient, and to persevere. His motive, I believe, was love of God and his creations. Reflecting on his final years, I am convinced that my father’s learning was leading him closer to God.

**Method**

Freddie used online self-instructional systems to learn how to become a CNA. My father used seed catalogues and other sources to learn how to become skilled at growing and arranging straw flowers. Methods vary. Some can even lead us away from God. Media, for example, can be powerful tools for learning, but only if we are selective. If a teacher is part of our method, we must also be selective.

When I received the calling to be the Sunday School General President, I soon learned that I would be speaking and teaching in many Spanish-speaking countries. My mission as a young man was in Tahiti, where I learned Tahitian and French, but I had always wanted to learn Spanish. When I was given the assignment to speak at a multistake conference that would be broadcast to Argentina, I thought, “This is my chance to learn Spanish.”

One day as I was returning to my office on the BYU campus, I saw the chair of the Spanish and Portuguese Department. I asked if he had a moment to listen to my Spanish. I explained to him that while serving as mission president, I had learned to say the “Missionary Purpose” from *Preach My Gospel* in Spanish, and I was wondering if I should try to give my talk to Argentina in Spanish six weeks later. He listened to my Spanish and then said, “Oh, you must do it. You can do it.”

So I began learning. My method? I wrote the talk in English, had it translated, asked a native Spanish speaker to record it, and then began practicing in earnest. I had multiple tutors along the way—one a BYU student from Peru who did all he could to help my pronunciation. Then I saw the department chair again. He offered to come to my office and listen to me as I practiced my talk. I tried in vain to convince him that he did not have time to worry about my Spanish, but he insisted.
He sat across from my desk, closed his eyes so he could concentrate on my pronunciation, and said, “OK, I want to hear you read your talk all the way through.” Periodically he would say, “Wait a minute, say that again, it sounds too much like French” (which I knew much better than Spanish). Feeling relieved, I finally finished my fifteen-minute talk, and he said, “OK, let’s hear it again.” I responded, “You don’t have time for that.” But again, he insisted, and I began again to read my talk—him listening with his eyes closed, giving periodic correction.

When he left my office, I sat there wondering why he would take so much time with someone like me with whom he had only a passing acquaintance. I could only conclude that his motives were completely pure. He had nothing to gain personally, and I had everything to gain. Was he a teacher? A tutor? Or was he simply ministering to one in need of some very specific help that he was uniquely prepared to give? All I knew was that his “method” not only improved my Spanish, but it led me closer to God.

**Relationships**

Relationships are at the core of learning that leads to God. My relationship with Freddie and Angel continued to become richer and more life-giving from the moment they were baptized through all of our subsequent encounters. My father’s relationships with those who received his flowers likewise became increasingly rewarding. And my relationship with the department chair who helped me with Spanish became more meaningful. In each case, the relationship between the learner and God was the most important of all outcomes.

Moses’s experience with the burning bush resulted in the gift of the Ten Commandments, but the most powerful outcome was his deepened relationship with God. He went to learn what he needed to do as God’s prophet, but he left Mount Sinai with a closeness to God that would ultimately mean more than the words engraved on those stone tablets. The brother of Jared also went to the Lord for specific instruction. He wanted heavenly help to find a way to provide light to the boats, but he was asked to provide his own proposal. He was asked to learn for himself. That learning led him directly to the Lord, and the light that came with his vision had a more far-reaching impact on his people than did the light from the rocks inside the boats.

When Joseph returned from the grove following his vision of God the Father and his Beloved Son, he said to his mother, “I have learned for myself” (Joseph Smith—History 1:20). What had he learned? Far more than he
initially set out to learn. He not only learned that he should join none of the churches in his town, but also learned the true nature of God, and perhaps above all felt the love God had for him as a young man and the complete confidence God had in him that he could usher in the final dispensation of the fulness of times.

Every relationship that grows out of learning that is motivated by love, that focuses on worthy content, and that relies on uplifting methods results in an increase of love among learners, between learner and teacher, and between learner and God. The relationship itself becomes the most important result of the learning. We often view the good relationships that can emerge from the learning process as side effects, or unintended positive consequences of our efforts to learn or to teach. But how we form relationships as we learn—both the relationship between learner and teacher and the relationship of both with God—may be the most important outcome of gospel learning. Those relationships can potentially last long after the class or course ends, lifting and motivating both learner and teacher to keep seeking more knowledge, more understanding, more truth.

If I ask a group of people to reflect on their life and select their most influential teacher—and then I ask them why that particular teacher was the one they selected—they will most commonly say something like the following: “That teacher made me feel like I could do more than I thought I could do. The teacher had so much confidence in me.” Almost no one says, “That teacher was the most knowledgeable one I ever had.” They usually focus, rather, on the personal feelings of worth and ability the teacher gave them—feelings that still influence their approach to life and learning decades later. The relationship they developed with their favorite teacher had a pervasive effect on their life that went well beyond the content of what they were trying to learn.

Implications

As educators, we are always trying to extend our mastery of the content we are teaching, but content—even scriptural content—does not necessarily lead one closer to God. While serving as an elders quorum president, I remember becoming frustrated during a lesson when two members of the quorum began arguing a doctrinal point.

The teacher was knowledgeable. He was teaching pure doctrine. But the two who were arguing were driving the Spirit from our meeting. I endured the
debate as long as I could and then stood, opened my Book of Mormon and explained that contention had no place in our meeting (see 3 Nephi 11:29).

The content of the lesson was not the problem. The method (arguing) was the problem, and the more obstinate each became in defending his point of view, the more relationships within the quorum were injured.

We cannot judge others’ motives, as only God knows our heart. But we can judge our own motives both as learners and teachers. If we prepare to teach out of love for God and for our students, we will be inspired to listen and observe, so that we can say and do those things that will lead learners closer to God.

Rather than perceiving ourselves as content experts, we begin to see ourselves as fellow learners who are trying to progress on the covenant path alongside our students. This view causes us to examine our own motives, to look inside and make certain that we are doing everything we do out of love for God and for our students.

We begin to focus more on the methods our students are using as learners, rather than focusing only on the methods we are using as teachers. Relationships become paramount—our own relationship with the Savior and the relationship that we forge with each student.

Increasing our own power to exercise agency so that we can in turn help our students increase their agentic power becomes our central goal. The new *Come, Follow Me* curriculum for adults and children and the youth curriculum, released in 2012, all emphasize the importance of learners acting for themselves and not being acted upon. Flexibility is a hallmark of the curriculum. Teachers who expect to be told precisely what to teach and how to teach each principle or doctrine are sometimes disappointed to find that their primary goal is not to present information, but rather to instill in their learners the desire and capacity to become diligent, self-directed gospel learners.

Learners who follow the principles in *Come, Follow Me* will become less dependent on teachers, children will become less dependent on parents, and teachers will become less dependent on manuals for direction. Rather, learners, parents, and teachers alike will become more dependent on the Spirit for inspiration to know what to study, how to study it, what to teach, and how to teach it. All will depend more on the Spirit to know which principle of the gospel they should be mastering at a given moment in time and which principle they should be living more fully.
When the *Come, Follow Me* curriculum was introduced for the youth, some would say, “Oh, I see, this curriculum emphasizes more classroom participation and less lecturing by the teacher.” Although this may have been one aspect of the curriculum, it was not the central premise that it was built upon. More important than the amount of participation was the amount of spiritual strengthening that was intended to occur—both for those teachers and class members. The same could be said about the *Come, Follow Me* adult curriculum. Its primary focus is to help learners draw closer to the Lord as they plant the seed of his word in their hearts, nourish it, and act on it.

With the new curriculum, our capacity to learn will increase because we will be exercising our agency in more powerful ways than ever before. Because we are exercising this God-given gift, we will be drawn closer to him and become more like him. Our learning will lead us to the giver of the gift. It will lead us to God.

**Conclusions**

Learning is an agentic act that can help us become like God. The more we exercise our agency as we seek all that is good and true, the more God will reveal what we should learn and how we should learn it.

God tutors each of his children because he loves each one infinitely. Likewise, our motive for learning is based on love—love for him and love for others.

The content and skills we seek to master are always aimed at truth. We are not attracted to worldly fads or trends, but we are constantly trying to magnify the talents and gifts God has given us.

The methods we employ in the learning process are as important as the content we seek to master. We do not learn out of pressure, compulsion, competition, or any other method that ignores or suppresses our agency.

As learners and teachers, we concentrate our efforts on the relationships we are forging during the learning process. Strengthening our relationship with God and with others takes precedence over any other learning goal.

As we continue to exercise our agency in new and more profound ways, our desire to learn what God would have us learn increases. This desire is born of the Spirit; it is not something we manufacture ourselves. Learning in the highest sense—the kind of learning we were born to do—is experiencing a change of heart, putting off an old way of thinking or acting and welcoming a new way.” Each such change that transpires within us draws us closer...
to God, and the closer we draw to him, the greater our desire for even more
and greater truths. Once this cycle begins, it gains an energy of its own—a
continual thirst for new knowledge and more truth, until one day “we shall
be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (Moroni 7:48).

Notes

1. For an overview of the definitions of the word learning, see Connie Malamed’s
-definitions-learning/. The remarkable aspect of all of these ten definitions is not their uniqueness but how similar they are.

2. See Paul V. Johnson, “Free to Choose Liberty or Captivity” (BYU devotional,
November 6, 2012).


4. See David A. Bednar, “Acting and Not Being Acted Upon” (video by The Church
of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, September 17, 2012), https://www.youtube.com
/watch?v=_NzcpeomBVY.

5. Neal A. Maxwell, “Grounded, Rooted, Established, and Settled” (BYU devotional,

6. J. Reuben Clark Jr., “Charge to President Howard S. McDonald,” Improvement Era,
January 1946, 14.

7. See Russell T. Osguthorpe, The Education of the Heart (American Fork, UT:
Covenant Communications, 1996).