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Joseph Smith's Christology: After Two Hundred Years

Robert L. Millet

During the last decade, a recurring question has been posed to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Is the church “changing?” In addition, it is asked, Is there some effort on the part of church leadership to have the church and its teachings, particularly those concerning Jesus Christ, become more acceptable to and thus more accepted by other Christians? The natural Latter-day Saint inclination is to react sharply that the church's doctrines concerning Jesus Christ are intact and even eternal, that the doctrines of Joseph Smith's day and the doctrines of our own day are one and the same, that little of consequence has been altered.

To be sure these doctrines remain intact, church leaders since the days of Joseph Smith have made significant doctrinal pronouncements about Jesus Christ, such as those in “The Origin of Man” in 1909,¹ “The Father and the Son” in 1916,² the two revelations (one of which was given to Joseph Smith) that were added to the canon of scripture in 1976 (now Doctrine and Covenants 137 and 138), the “Statement of the First Presidency on God's Love for All Mankind in 1978,”³ and “The Living Christ” in 2000.⁴

Still today, the basic doctrines found in Joseph Smith's own words, in the revelations given to and through him, and in his translations of ancient records remain unaltered. Jesus's suffering and death on the

cross and the grace of God have been taught consistently by church leaders and can readily be traced back to Joseph Smith. What has changed in the last few decades is the emphasis placed upon these subjects and upon the church's belief in Christ. This shift has been particularly evident as the general church membership has increased in scriptural understanding and as members and leaders have responded to their beliefs being misunderstood and misrepresented.

Joseph Smith on the Doctrine of Christ

“God is my friend,” Joseph wrote to his wife Emma at a difficult time. “In him I shall find comfort. I have given my life into his hands. I am prepared to go at his call. I desire to be with Christ. I count not my life dear to me, only to do his will.”⁵ As much as Joseph Smith believed in, loved, and centered his life and teachings in the Savior—and he certainly did—only a few of his sermons deal principally with Jesus Christ and the atonement. Why would this be the case? For one thing, all of the scriptures given to the church through Joseph Smith are filled with passages having to do with the nature of fallen humanity, the character and power of Jesus, the doctrine of spiritual rebirth, and the myriads of blessings that flow from the infinite atonement.

As I have reflected on this for years, it appears to me that for Joseph Smith, “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2) was a given, a fundamental and foundational truth, the message of messages, the doctrine of doctrines. Everything else, though supplementary, was secondary. He did not feel the need to preach endless sermons on the subject that underlay everything else he taught. Faith, repentance, baptism, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, resurrection, judgment, and a myriad of other theological issues have meaning only because of the atonement. I suppose it would be somewhat like hearing a preacher stand before a large congregation and say, “I am a Baptist pastor. And I am also a Christian, a believer in the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth.” The second sentence, though informative, is generally not necessary. Clearly if the man is a Baptist he is a Christian. Likewise, Joseph Smith was convinced that the central role of a prophet of God was to bear testimony of Jesus, since, as John the Revelator explained, the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy (Revelation 19:10).⁶

Past Emphasis upon Differences

When the Saints moved from Illinois to the Great Basin, that move was, I believe, as much ideological as it was geographical. Latter-day Saint people had been insulted, accosted, attacked, robbed, persecuted, and martyred, and their desire was to get away and find a place where they could think and act and worship without hindrance or interference. One can fully appreciate why the Latter-day Saints would develop an attitude toward all others of “us versus them”⁷ and begin to erect a doctrinal fortress to protect themselves from any invading theological forces. Indeed, it seems that Mormons began to focus more and more upon their distinctions, those doctrinal matters that were either slightly or greatly different from Protestant and Catholic teachings.

This kind of doctrinal dialectic continued well into the twentieth century. Let me illustrate with a personal example. Just before leaving for a mission, I found myself reading and thinking about the gospel with a bit of trepidation. After spending several days browsing through some of the great doctrinal chapters in the Book of Mormon, I approached my father with a question. (I need to add at this point that my father had grown up in Louisiana as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, taught seminary to the youth for many years, and knew the principles and doctrines of the gospel well.) I asked, “Dad, what does it mean to be saved by grace?” He stared at me for a moment and then said firmly, “We don’t believe in that!” I responded with, “We don’t believe in it? Why not?” He promptly added, “Because the Baptists do!”

My father’s statement speaks volumes. We had grown up in the Bible Belt, where we were surrounded by many noble and dedicated Christians who loved the Lord and had given their hearts to him. Over the years, we had watched scores of revivals on television and spent hours listening to radio broadcasts in which the pastor had affirmed that salvation comes “by grace alone.” Knowing as he did that Latter-day Saints believed in the necessity of good works, my father had simply put the matter to rest by stating that we believed something very different.

One does not travel very far in his or her study of the New Testament or the Book of Mormon, however, without recognizing the central and saving need to trust in and rely upon the merits and mercy and grace of the Holy Messiah. That teaching is not just found in a few obscure passages; it is throughout holy writ, one of the burdens of scripture.

Same Doctrines, Greater Emphasis

Several of the doctrines concerning Christ that are found in the revelations and translations of Joseph Smith seem to have received increased emphasis in recent decades. Two that have been particularly commented on by Christian observers are the saving efficacy of the cross and the magnificent grace of God.

The Cross. One of my Christian friends asked me about what he called our “changing views on the role of the cross.” He suggested that if a group of one hundred Latter-day Saints had been asked some years ago the question, “Where did the atonement of Jesus Christ take place?” probably eighty to ninety persons would have answered, “In the Garden of Gethsemane.” I think his assessment is probably accurate; most Mormons were brought up on the idea that while the Protestants and Catholics taught that the atonement took place on the cross of Calvary, Latter-day Saints believe the greater suffering took place in Gethsemane. My friend suggested that if that same query were posed to a hundred Mormons today, sixty to seventy would answer that the atonement took place in Gethsemane *and* on the cross, that what began in the Garden was culminated, climaxed on Golgotha. My experience teaching hundreds of students at Brigham Young University corroborates this trend.

Nonetheless, a brief survey of statements by church leaders demonstrates that from the days of Joseph Smith the cross of Christ has held a prominent place in the faith. I will represent Joseph by passages from the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants. Nephi, a Book of Mormon prophet, foresaw some six hundred years before the birth of the Savior that Jesus would be “*lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world*” (1 Nephi 11:33; emphasis added).

Much like Paul, Jacob in the Book of Mormon called upon the followers of the Redeemer to experience for themselves the power of the cross: “Wherefore, we would to God that we could persuade all men not to rebel against God, to provoke him to anger, but that all men would believe in Christ, and *view his death, and suffer his cross* and bear the shame of the world” (Jacob 1:8; emphasis added; compare Moroni 9:25). Notice the language of the risen Lord to the people of the Book of Mormon:

Behold I have given unto you my gospel, and this is the gospel which I have given unto you—that I came into the world to do the will of my Father, because my Father sent me. And *my Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross*; and after that I had been lifted up upon the cross, that I might draw all men unto me, that as I have been lifted up by men even so should men be lifted up by the Father, to stand before me, to be judged of their works, whether they be good or whether they be evil. (3 Nephi 27:13–14; emphasis added)

The testimony of the Doctrine and Covenants is that “Jesus was *crucified by sinful men for the sins of the world*, yea, for the remission of sins unto the contrite heart” (Doctrine and Covenants 21:9; emphasis added). “I am Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” another passage begins, “who was crucified for the sins of the world, even as many as will believe on my name, that they may become the [children] of God, even one in me as I am one in the Father, as the Father is one in me, that we may be one” (Doctrine and Covenants 35:2). At the start of a brief passage on various spiritual gifts, a revelation in the Doctrine and Covenants affirms, “To some it is given by the Holy Ghost to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that *he was crucified for the sins of the world*. To others it is given to believe on their words, that they also might have eternal life if they continue faithful” (Doctrine and Covenants 46:13–14; emphasis added). Additionally, it is written, “Behold, I, the Lord, who was crucified for the sins of the world, give unto you a commandment that you shall forsake the world” (Doctrine and Covenants 53:2).

I have not even begun to list the scores of passages in the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants that speak of the vital need

for Christ's suffering *and death*. For it was not just his suffering, but also his death on the cruel cross of Calvary that was an indispensable element of the atoning sacrifice. As Mormon explained in the Book of Mormon, "Now Aaron began to open the scriptures unto them concerning the coming of Christ, and also concerning the resurrection of the dead, and that there could be no redemption for mankind save it were through the death and sufferings of Christ, and the atonement of his blood" (Alma 21:9; compare Alma 22:14). In short, "he surely must die that salvation may come" (Helaman 14:15).⁸

Added to all the statements about the cross is this about Gethsemane, as dictated by Joseph Smith:

For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; but if they would not repent they must suffer even as I; which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink—nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men. (Doctrine and Covenants 19:16–19)

The following series of statements shows how both Gethsemane and the cross are mentioned, sometimes separately and sometimes together, by church leaders from Joseph Smith's day to the present. John Taylor, the third president of the church, stated, "The plan, the arrangement, the agreement, the covenant was made, entered into, and accepted before the foundation of the world; it was prefigured by sacrifices, and was carried out and consummated on the cross."⁹

In June 1888, Wilford Woodruff, Joseph F. Smith, and Moses Thatcher (the general superintendency of the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association) wrote, "Alone, while treading the winepress of the wrath of devils and men, [Christ] gained *the keys of death, hell and the grave*." These keys "were forged," they added, while Christ prayed in Gethsemane, endured the acts of malice that followed, and suffered the agony of the cross.¹⁰

George Q. Cannon, counselor in the First Presidency of the church, stressed in 1899 that "so effectually and permanently does the Lord wish to impress the remembrance of that great sacrifice at

Calvary on our memories that He permits us all to partake of the emblems—the bread and wine.”¹¹

Joseph F. Smith, president of the church from 1901 to 1918, reminded us that “having been born anew, which is the putting away of the old man sin, and putting on of the man Christ Jesus, *we have become soldiers of the Cross*, having enlisted under the banner of Jehovah for time and for eternity.”¹² President Smith was taught in his 1918 vision of the redemption of the dead that salvation has been “wrought through the sacrifice of the Son of God upon the cross” (Doctrine and Covenants 138:35).

George F. Richards, an apostle of the church, stated in 1914, “We read in the Book of Mormon (Mosiah 3:7), a prediction of the coming of the Lord in the meridian of time, and how he would suffer for the sins of the people: ‘For behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and the abominations of his people.’ It was in the Garden of Gethsemane that this prophecy was fulfilled.”¹³

In 1921, Rudger Clawson, counselor to President Heber J. Grant, declared that “the atonement made upon Mount Calvary was the supreme sacrifice ever made in all the world.”¹⁴ In their 1921 Christmas epistle, he and the other members of the First Presidency again testified to the efficacy of Christ’s suffering on the cross: “He whose mortal birth in the Manger of Bethlehem the world celebrates at this festive season, is indeed the Son of God and the Savior of mankind through the atonement wrought out on the Cross of Calvary.”¹⁵

Church leader B. H. Roberts explained: “If it be true, and it is, that men value things in proportion to what they cost, then how dear to them must be the Atonement, since it cost the Christ so much in suffering that he may be said to have been baptized by blood-sweat in Gethsemane, before he reached the climax of his passion, on Calvary.”¹⁶

In a 1952 general conference talk, Joseph L. Wirthlin, presiding bishop of the church, discussed what it means “to take upon one the name of Jesus Christ.” One requirement was that a person must “remember the great sacrifice that [Christ] made upon Calvary’s hill.”¹⁷

Bruce R. McConkie, an apostle of the church, movingly articulated in 1985 the relationship between Gethsemane and Calvary: “The cross was raised that all might see and gape and curse and deride. . . . There was a mighty storm, as though the very God of Nature was in agony. And truly he was, for *while he was hanging on the cross for another three hours, from noon to 3:00 P.M., all the infinite agonies and merciless pains of Gethsemane recurred.*”¹⁸

Ezra Taft Benson, president of the church from 1985 to 1994, lauded the redeeming love manifest in both sites: “In Gethsemane and on Calvary, He [Christ] worked out the infinite and eternal atonement. It was the greatest single act of love in recorded history.”¹⁹

At the 1996 First Presidency Christmas Devotional, President Gordon B. Hinckley stated that “we honor His birth. But without His death that birth would have been but one more birth. It was the redemption which He worked out in the Garden of Gethsemane and upon the cross of Calvary which made His gift immortal, universal, and everlasting.”²⁰

The above statements evidence that Latter-day Saints from the time of Joseph Smith have taught that Christ’s suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane and his suffering and death on the cross of Calvary were both necessary in accomplishing his overarching mission—to make a substitutionary offering in behalf of all those who would accept him and his gospel.

The Grace of God. Most observers would agree that the Latter-day Saints seem to be focusing more and more as a church upon those scriptural passages that highlight the reality of man’s weakness and mortal limitations, while at the same time attending to God’s infinite and ever-available power to lift, to liberate, to lighten our burdens, and to change our nature. As church leader Bruce C. Hafen pointed out, “In recent years, we Latter-day Saints have been teaching, singing, and testifying much more about the Savior Jesus Christ. I rejoice that we are rejoicing more. As we ‘talk [more] of Christ’ (2 Nephi 25:26), the gospel’s doctrinal fullness will come out of obscurity.”²¹

Although we are “rejoicing more,” in a strict sense nothing in the Latter-day Saint doctrine of Christ has changed in the last 175 years. The following are examples of words that came through or from Joseph Smith:

The Spirit is the same, yesterday, today, and forever. And the way is prepared from the fall of man, and salvation is free. (2 Nephi 2:4)

Wherefore, how great the importance to make these things known unto the inhabitants of the earth, that they may know that there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah. (2 Nephi 2:8)

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, reconcile yourselves to the will of God, and not to the will of the devil and the flesh; and remember, after ye are reconciled unto God, that it is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved. (2 Nephi 10:24)

And now, my beloved brethren, after ye have gotten into this strait and narrow path, I would ask if all is done? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; for ye have not come thus far save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save. (2 Nephi 31:19; see also Alma 24:10, Helaman 14:13, Moroni 6:4, and Doctrine and Covenants 3:20)

And, if you keep my commandments and endure to the end you shall have eternal life, which gift is the greatest of all the gifts of God. (Doctrine and Covenants 14:7; see also Doctrine and Covenants 6:13).

The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it.²²

One hundred and thirty-nine years after Joseph Smith elaborated on the centrality of Jesus Christ, one of his apostolic successors, Boyd K. Packer, put it this way: "Through Him [Christ] mercy can be fully extended to each of us without offending the eternal law of justice. This truth," Packer continued, "is the very root of Christian doctrine. You may know much about the gospel as it branches out from there, but if you only know the branches and those branches do not touch that root, if they have been cut free from that truth, there will be no life nor substance nor redemption in them."²³

In addition, notice the following representative statements by other church leaders through the years on the vital matter of the grace of God.²⁴

Joseph Smith's successor, Brigham Young, declared in typical forceful fashion:

It requires all the atonement of Christ, the mercy of the Father, the pity of angels and the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to be with us always, and then to do the very best we possibly can, to get rid of this sin within us, so that we may escape from this world into the celestial kingdom.²⁵

There are no persons without evil passions to embitter their lives. Mankind are revengeful, passionate, hateful, and devilish in their dispositions. This we inherit through the fall, and the grace of God is designed to enable us to overcome it.²⁶

In and of ourselves we have no power to control our own minds and passions; but the grace of God is sufficient to give us perfect victory.²⁷

All will have to come to the Lord and be sanctified through the grace of Christ by faith in his name; without this, I am happy to say, that none can be purified, sanctified and prepared to inherit eternal glory.²⁸

President Joseph F. Smith discoursed on the relationship between grace and revelation: "Notwithstanding our many weaknesses, imperfections and follies the Lord still continues His mercy, manifests His grace and imparts unto us His Holy Spirit, that our minds may be illuminated by the light of revelation."²⁹

Wishing all to partake of the grace of God, Heber J. Grant, president of the church from 1918 to 1945, entreated, "We call upon all men to come unto him [Christ], that through his grace they may attain to eternal life and an inheritance with him in the kingdom of his Father."³⁰

"I am not unmindful," acknowledged David O. McKay, president of the church from 1951 to 1970, "of the scripture that declares, 'For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.' (Ephesians 2:8.) That is absolutely true, for man in his taking upon himself mortality was impotent to save himself."³¹

Joseph Fielding Smith, among others, noted the differences between mortal beings and Jesus Christ that require us to rely upon grace. He gave this explanation while an apostle:

There is a difference between the Lord Jesus Christ and the rest of mankind. We have no life in ourselves, for no power has been given unto us, to lay down our lives and take them again. That is beyond our power, and so, being subject to death, and being sinners—for we are all transgressors of the law to some extent, no matter how good we have tried to be—we are therefore unable in and of ourselves to receive redemption from our sins by any act of our own.

This is the grace that Paul was teaching. Therefore, it is by the grace of Jesus Christ that we are saved. And had he not come into the world, and laid down his life that he might take it again, or as he said in another place, to give us life that we may have it more abundantly—we would still be subject to death and be in our sins. . . . So we are saved by grace and that not of ourselves. It is the gift of God.³²

Then in contemporary times, Dallin H. Oaks, a current apostle of the church, remarked on the insufficiency of works to save even the best of us:

Men and women unquestionably have impressive powers and can bring to pass great things. But after all our obedience and good works, we cannot be saved from death or the effects of our individual sins without the grace extended by the atonement of Jesus Christ. . . . In other words, salvation does not come simply by keeping the commandments. . . . Even those who try to obey and serve God with all their heart, might, mind, and strength are unprofitable servants (Mosiah 2:21). Man cannot earn his own salvation.³³

It is so easy to allow the theological pendulum to swing from one end to the other, to swing from religious legalism on the one hand to profligate libertarianism on the other. In the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants is found a more balanced approach to grace and works. The gospel of Jesus Christ is in fact a gospel covenant, a two-way agreement between God and man. On his part, God agrees to do for us what we could never do for ourselves—forgive our sins, cleanse our nature, purify our hearts, raise us from the dead, and glorify us hereafter. We agree, on the other hand, to do that which we can do, namely, to exercise faith in Jesus Christ—to have total trust, complete confidence, and a ready

reliance upon him. Further, true faith always results in faithfulness, in obedience, in good works. It may be true that we are saved by grace alone, but grace is never alone.

Reasons for the Increased Emphasis

What has happened? What changes or developments have taken place that would lead the Latter-day Saints to see things with new eyes and appreciate some sacred matters that the general membership hardly noticed fifty years ago?

Greater Scriptural Literacy. In the 1970s the church began what has come to be known as a correlated scripture study program. In their Sunday School classes, all members of the church became involved in a sequential scripture study of one of the books within the Latter-day Saint canon: the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants (including the History of the Church³⁴). Whereas before this time much of the emphasis was upon the study of lesson manuals, now the text of study became the scriptures themselves. This has added immeasurably to the scriptural literacy of the Latter-day Saints. The doctrinal depth, familiarity, and personal application of scriptural truths is greater now among the Latter-day Saint people than at any time in the history of the church.³⁵

When Ezra Taft Benson became the thirteenth president of the church in 1985, he placed a strong emphasis upon the use of the Book of Mormon, stressing that the doctrines and teachings of the Book of Mormon should be studied and discussed and applied more regularly by the Latter-day Saints. Whether one accepts the divine origin of the Book of Mormon or not, it does not take long in reading or perusing the text to discover that the Book of Mormon is grounded in redemptive theology. The church leaders have stressed its teachings for over twenty years now, inevitably resulting in a more Christ-centered emphasis in the whole church. For example, studies show that references to the Book of Mormon from 1942 to 1970 constituted about 12 percent of the total scriptures cited and then “jumped to 40 percent” after President Benson challenged the church to become more involved in the study of the Book of Mormon.³⁶

Refinement. Further, as I have suggested elsewhere,³⁷ Mormons have changed in another way: there has been an important refinement over the years in regard to what they believe and teach. Few Latter-day Saints who are seeking to stay in the mainstream of the church and to remain orthodox in their teaching would feel free to just “grab anything by the tail” that was taught in our past and put it forward as the doctrine of the church today. Just because something was once said or written, even by someone in authority, does not make it fair game to teach as doctrine. Certain parameters allow us to discern what is deserving of our attention and our study: (1) Is it taught in the standard works? (2) Is it found in official proclamations or declarations? (3) Is it discussed in general conference today by apostles and prophets? and (4) Is it found in the church’s general handbooks or the approved curriculum? Through adherence to these parameters, the Latter-day Saints’ understanding of and emphasis on Christian doctrine has been shaped.

Desire to Be Understood. In one sense, Latter-day Saints have been the target of anti-Mormon propaganda since 1830. This is nothing new. But in the last few decades, the amount of polemical material has increased dramatically, some of it not only uncomplimentary but even blatantly false. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has begun to emphasize its heartfelt acceptance of Jesus as the Christ so that people in society may not misunderstand its fundamental and core beliefs. Mormons believe what is in the New Testament and believe what God has revealed in the latter days concerning Christ. As indicated earlier, such teachings did not spring into existence within the last few years; they have been in the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, Pearl of Great Price, and teachings of Joseph Smith and other church leaders from the beginning.

Specific Areas of Misunderstanding. The question that persons raise repeatedly is, Do the Latter-day Saints worship a “different Jesus”? Latter-day Saints accept and endorse the testimony of the New Testament writers and have done so since the days of Joseph Smith. His sermons were filled with biblical quotations and paraphrases. In short, the Latter-day Saints believe in the Jesus of history. They believe that the Jesus of history is indeed the Christ of faith.

From Joseph Smith's time on, Latter-day Saints claim to possess the glorious glad tidings of the Bible and also valuable insight into the work and wisdom of the Master through modern revelation and additional scripture. To put this into perspective, consider the following question: Did early Christians who accepted the Gospel of John "worship a different Jesus" than those who had for decades relied exclusively upon, say, the Gospel of Mark? The fourth Gospel certainly offered more and deeper insight into the power, premortality, and divinity of Jesus, but is the Savior John writes about a different Savior than Mark's? Supplementation is hardly the same as contradiction.

"As a Church we have critics, many of them," President Gordon B. Hinckley has stated.

They say we do not believe in the traditional Christ of Christianity. There is some substance to what they say. Our faith, our knowledge is not based on ancient tradition, the [post-New Testament] creeds which came of a finite understanding and out of the almost infinite discussions of men trying to arrive at a definition of the risen Christ. Our faith, our knowledge comes of the witness of a prophet in this dispensation who saw before him the great God of the universe and His Beloved Son, the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. . . . It is out of that knowledge, rooted deep in the soil of modern revelation, that we, in the words of [a Book of Mormon prophet named] Nephi, "talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that [we and] our children may know to what source [we] may look for a remission of our sins" (2 Nephi 25:26).³⁸

The founder of the faith, Joseph Smith, said it this way: "Did I build on any other man's foundation? I have got all the truth which the Christian world possessed, and an independent revelation in the bargain, and God will bear me off triumphant."³⁹

Another time, Joseph said, "One of the grand fundamental principles of 'Mormonism' is to receive truth, let it come from whence it may."⁴⁰ Along these lines, Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canturbury, has written the following touching and appropriate prayer about gaining "something fresh" of Jesus Christ:

Jesus,
 help us not to hide in our churchy words;
 when we worship, let us know and feel that there is always some-
 thing new,
 something fresh to see of you.
 Do not let us forget that you will always have more to give us,
 more than we could ever guess.
 Amen.⁴¹

Then there is the matter of those who claim Mormons are not Christians. "Are we Christians?" President Hinckley asked on another occasion. "Of course we are Christians. We believe in Christ. We worship Christ. We take upon ourselves in solemn covenant His holy name. The Church to which we belong carries His name. He is our Lord, our Savior, our Redeemer through whom came the great Atonement with salvation and eternal life."⁴² Latter-day Saints simply do not want to be misunderstood or misrepresented.

The Amsterdam Declaration (2000) includes an explanation that could resolve the debate:

A Christian is a believer in God who is enabled by the Holy Spirit to submit to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior in a personal relationship of disciple to master and to live the life of God's kingdom. The word Christian should not be equated with any particular cultural, ethnic, political, or ideological tradition or group. Those who know and love Jesus are also called Christ-followers, believers and disciples.⁴³

By that definition, I believe that Joseph Smith and most Latter-day Saints would consider themselves to be Christian, and their friends of other faiths would agree.

Less than a year before his death, Joseph Smith shared his perception of the differences between Mormons and other Christians: "The inquiry is frequently made of me, 'Wherein do you differ from others in your religious views?' In reality and essence we do not differ so far in our religious views, but that we could all drink into one principle of love."⁴⁴

Conclusion

Frankly, to be baptized into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is to enter a religious society that is anything but static; it is not, as Neal A. Maxwell, an apostle of the church, has observed, a “fossilized faith” but instead a “kinetic kingdom.”⁴⁵

So while Latter-day Saints hold tenaciously to the foundational doctrines and principles of revealed religion laid down by Joseph Smith, on the one hand, it will appear to many, on the other hand, that the Latter-day Saints are changing as they enter into and contribute to the religious discussions in the world. In fact, they just may be coming of age, taking their rightful place at the table, offering distinctive Christological insights to a world that may in time come to appreciate them. “Those who observe us say that we are moving into the mainstream of religion,” President Gordon B. Hinckley observed. Then he declared:

We are not changing. The world’s perception of us is changing. We teach the same doctrine. We have the same organization. We labor to perform the same good works. But the old hatred is disappearing, the old persecution is dying. People are better informed. They are coming to realize what we stand for and what we do.⁴⁶

Almost twenty years ago, O. Kendall White published a book entitled *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology*.⁴⁷ White drew a comparison between Protestant Neo-Orthodoxy—the effort during the twentieth century to return to the fundamentals of the faith stressed so solidly by the leaders of the Reformation—and a like effort by some Latter-day Saint writers who seemed to be leaning more and more heavily upon the Book of Mormon and such doctrines as the nature of fallen man, the need for spiritual rebirth, and salvation by grace. In my review essay of this work, I concluded with the following:

Kendall White is correct in detecting a movement afloat in Mormonism in the latter part of the twentieth century. It is a movement toward a more thoroughly redemptive base to our theology, but a movement that is in harmony with the teachings of the Book of Mormon and one that may be long overdue. These

recent developments may represent more of a retrenchment and a refinement than a reversion. I believe that [quoting White] “few things portend a more ominous future” for us than to fail to take seriously the Book of Mormon and the redemptive theology set forth therein; the only real “crisis” to fear would be attempts to build Mormonism upon any other foundation.⁴⁸

Fortunately, after two hundred years, Joseph Smith's Christology, is, if anything, apprehended more clearly than ever by the Latter-day Saints and expounded upon in public statements more frequently by their leaders. In other words, the doctrine of Christ has become, as Joseph Smith said it should be, the fundamental principle of our religion.⁴⁹

Notes

1. “The Origin of Man,” in *Messages of the First Presidency*, comp. James R. Clark, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965), 4:203.

2. “The Father and Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve,” in Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, 5:34.

3. “Statement of the First Presidency on God's Love for All Mankind in 1978,” February 15, 1978, in Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, reprinted in “I Have a Question,” *Ensign* 18 (January 1988): 48.

4. “The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *Ensign* 30, no. 4 (April 2000): 2–3.

5. Dean C. Jessee, ed. and comp., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (1984; repr., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 264–65, punctuation corrected.

6. See, for example, Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 119, 160, 269, 300, 312, 315.

7. See, for example, Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Work Moves Forward,” in *Official Report of the 169th Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1999).

8. This doctrine was taught from the very beginning. Some three millennia before the coming of Jesus to earth, Enoch saw in vision “the day of the coming of the Son of Man, even in the flesh; and his soul rejoiced, saying: The Righteous is lifted up, and the Lamb is slain from the foundation of the world.” Enoch looked “and beheld the Son of Man lifted up on the cross, after the manner of men” (Moses 7:47, 55).

9. G. Homer Durham, comp., *The Gospel Kingdom: Selections from the Writings and Discourses of John Taylor* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 114.

10. Wilford Woodruff, Joseph F. Smith, and Moses Thatcher, "Epistle of the General Superintendency," *The Contributor* 9, no. 8 (June 1888): 302–5; emphasis added.

11. Jerreld L. Newquist, ed., *Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon, First Counselor to Presidents John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, and Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 397.

12. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1971), 2:91, emphasis added.

13. George F. Richards, in *84th Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1914).

14. Rudger Clawson, in *92nd Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1921).

15. See Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, 5:208.

16. B. H. Roberts, *Seventy's Course in Theology, Fourth Year: The Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1911), 126.

17. Joseph L. Wirthlin, in *123rd Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1952).

18. Bruce R. McConkie, "The Purifying Power of Gethsemane," in *Official Report of the 155th Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), emphasis added; compare *The Mortal Messiah*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979–81), 4:230; Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 620; see also James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 613, 660–61.

19. Ezra Taft Benson, *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 14.

20. Gordon B. Hinckley, Christmas devotional, December 8, 1996; cited in Sarah Weaver, "President Hinckley: Jesus' Death Gave His Birth Meaning," *Church News*, December 14, 1996, 3–4; see also President Hinckley's remarks at a missionary devotional, December 15, 2002, in "Divine Mission of Jesus," *Church News*, September 3, 2005, 2. More recently, President Hinckley observed that the way we live our lives—patterned after the only sinless being to walk the earth—is the great symbol of our Christianity. He went on to add that "no member of this Church must ever forget the terrible price paid by our Redeemer, who gave His life that all men might live—the agony of Gethsemane, the bitter mockery of His trial, the vicious crown of thorns tearing at His flesh, the blood

cry of the mob before Pilate, the lonely burden of His heavy walk along the way to Calvary, the terrifying pain as great nails pierced his hands and feet. . . . We cannot forget that. We must never forget it, for here our Savior, our Redeemer, the Son of God, gave Himself, a vicarious sacrifice for each of us." Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Symbol of our Faith," *Ensign* 35, no. 4 (April 2005): 4.

21. Bruce C. Hafen, "The Atonement: All for All," *Ensign* 34, no. 5 (May 2004): 97.

22. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 121.

23. Boyd K. Packer, "The Mediator," *Ensign* 7, no. 5 (May 1977): 56.

24. Some of the leaders who made definitive statements are Orson Pratt, B. H. Roberts, and Bruce R. McConkie. See Orson Pratt, "The True Faith," in *A Series of Pamphlets* (Liverpool: Franklin D. Richards, 1852), 6, 9; *Orson Pratt's Works* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1990); B. H. Roberts, *The Gospel: An Exposition of Its First Principles and Man's Relationship to Deity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 179–80; Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah: The First Coming of Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 346; and Bruce R. McConkie, "What Think Ye of Salvation By Grace?" *Brigham Young University 1983–84 Fireside and Devotional Speeches* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Publications, 1984), 48.

25. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 11:301, February 3, 1867.

26. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 8:160, September 2, 1860.

27. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 8:226, October 21, 1860.

28. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 14:150, June 25, 1871.

29. Joseph F. Smith, in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:347, January 10, 1869.

30. "A Centennial Message," in *Messages of the First Presidency*, 5:286 (April 6, 1930).

31. *Gospel Ideals: Selections from the Discourses of David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City: Improvement Era, 1958), 10–11.

32. Bruce R. McConkie, comp., *Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 2:309–10.

33. Dallin H. Oaks, *With Full Purpose of Heart* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 75.

34. Joseph Smith Jr., *The History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971).

35. The scriptures are impacting the youth, and the youth are maturing spiritually. Recent studies carried out at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, for example, indicate that Latter-day Saint young people "know more about their faith, are more committed to it, and abide more closely by its teachings concerning social behavior than do their peers." Gordon B. Hinckley,

“Gambling,” *Ensign* 35, no. 5 (May 2005): 61, referencing Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); reported in *Deseret Morning News*, March 15, 2005, A1, A3.

36. As cited in Bruce C. Hafen, *A Disciple’s Life: The Biography of Neal A. Maxwell* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 502.

37. Robert L. Millet, “What Is Our Doctrine?” *The Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 4, no. 3 (2003): 15–33; also in Robert L. Millet, *Getting at the Truth: Responding to Difficult Questions about LDS Beliefs* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), 43–69.

38. Gordon B. Hinckley, “We Look to Christ,” *Ensign* 32, no. 5 (May 2002): 90–91.

39. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 376.

40. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 313.

41. Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgment* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 47.

42. Gordon B. Hinckley, “What Are People Asking about Us?” *Ensign* 28, no. 11 (November 1998): 71.

43. Cited in J. I. Packer and Thomas C. Oden, *One Faith: The Evangelical Consensus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004), 121–22.

44. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 313.

45. Neal A. Maxwell, *Things As They Really Are* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 46.

46. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Living in the Fulness of Times,” *Ensign* 31, no. 11 (November 2001): 5.

47. O. Kendall White, *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987).

48. Robert L. Millet, “Joseph Smith and Modern Mormonism: Orthodoxy, Neoorthodoxy, Tension, and Tradition,” *BYU Studies* 29, no. 3 (1989): 66.

49. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 121.