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"Oh Say, What Is Truth?": Approaches to Doctrine

Michael Goodman

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> Yes, say, what is truth? 'Tis the brightest prize
> To which mortals or Gods can aspire.
> Go search in the depths where it glittering lies,
> Or ascend in pursuit to the loftiest skies:
> 'Tis an aim for the noblest desire. . . .
>
> Then say, what is truth? 'Tis the last and the first,
> For the limits of time it steps o'er.
> Tho the heavens depart and the earth's fountains burst,
> Truth, the sum of existence, will weather the worst,
> Eternal, unchanged, evermore.[1]

The restored gospel of Jesus Christ, like other religious traditions, claims to be based on true doctrines.[2] The above hymn, included in the first edition of the Pearl of Great Price, encapsulates the deep longing for truth by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Statements by Church leaders abound extolling the virtue and power of truth, but such statements often beg the question, What is truth? Scripture states that "truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come."[3] Church curricular material

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1. John Jaques, "Oh Say, What Is Truth?," in *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 272.

2. Joseph Smith stated that "Mormonism is truth; and every man who embraced it felt himself at liberty to embrace every truth." "Copy of a Letter from J. Smith Jr. to Mr. Galland," *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 4 (February 1840): 53.

3. Doctrine and Covenants 93:24. One scholar pointed out that this definition closely aligns with the correspondence theory of truth. See Loyd Ericson, "The Challenges of

further states that "divine truth is absolute reality" and "truth is eternal."[4] In the theology of the Church, truth is inextricably connected to God.

Truth and God

Canonized scripture portrays truth as co-eternal with God.[5] Church theology has long held that there is a reciprocal, interdependent relationship between God and truth. The Book of Mormon teaches that if God varied from eternal law and truth, God would cease to be God.[6] One Book of Mormon prophet exclaimed, "Yea, Lord, I know that thou speakest the truth, for thou art a God of truth" (Ether 3:12). Doctrine and Covenants 93 further teaches the intricate relationship between truth and God by making it another name for God. Christ himself is referred to as "the Spirit of truth" twice (D&C 93:9, 11). Truth is further identified as a synonym for light, spirit, and intelligence, each of which further connects truth to God.[7] Not only is God referred to as "truth," but he is also considered the source of all truth for his children: "true doctrine comes from God, the source and foundation of all truths."[8]

Defining Mormon Doctrine," *Element* 3, nos. 1 and 2 (2007): 69–90. For a modern definition of the correspondence theory of truth, see Marian David, "The Correspondence Theory of Truth," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* ed. Edward N. Zalta (2016), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/truth-correspondence/.

4. "Divine Truth," in *Doctrines of the Gospel Student Manual,* ed. Church Educational System (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2010), 2–3.

5. See Doctrine and Covenants 1:39; 88:66; 93:29–30.

6. Three times in Alma's teachings recorded in Alma 42, he states that such a deviation from truth would cause God to cease to be God, even as he emphatically states, "But God ceaseth not to be God" (42:23).

7. "He [Christ] that ascended up on high, as also he descended below all things, in that he comprehended all things, that he might be in all and through all things, the light of truth; which truth shineth. This is the light of Christ. As also he is in the sun, and the light of the sun, and the power thereof by which it was made. As also he is in the moon, and is the light of the moon, and the power thereof by which it was made; as also the light of the stars, and the power thereof by which they were made; and the earth also, and the power thereof, even the earth upon which you stand. And the light which shineth, which giveth you light, is through him who enlighteneth your eyes, which is the same light that quickeneth your understandings; which light proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space—the light which is in all things, which giveth life to all things, which is the law by which all things are governed, even the power of God who sitteth upon his throne, who is in the bosom of eternity, who is in the midst of all things" (D&C 88:6–13).

8. L. Tom Perry, "The Doctrines and Principles Contained in the Articles of Faith," *Ensign* 43, no. 11 (November 2013): 46; see also Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "We Are Doing a Great Work and Cannot Come Down," *Ensign* 39, no. 5 (May 2009): 59–62.

These scriptures and comments highlight the relational nature of truth in Latter-day Saint thought. "Truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come" (D&C 93:24), but only God knows this truth perfectly, and hence he is the only sure source of truth. Accordingly, it is only in compliance with and in relationship to God that man can come to know all truth. A philosopher who is a Latter-day Saint explained that "among the main original senses of 'truth' was 'troth'—a pledge or covenant of faithfulness made uprightly and without deceit. . . . It is in the spirit of these ancient etymologies that Latter-day Saints believe that to walk in truth is to keep one's commitments to follow Christ's way uprightly."[9] To know truth according to these statements is to know God. For this reason, Church members often believe the surest source of truth comes by way of direct communication (revelation) from God.[10]

Truth, Doctrine, and Revelation

Latter-day Saints are instructed to "seek learning, even by study and also by faith" (D&C 88:118). In the cosmology of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, though intimately connected to his mortal children, God stands outside of the mortal sphere and hence outside of man's ability to perfectly measure and investigate using only secular means. Perhaps, for this reason, Church members have traditionally placed great emphasis on learning truth through spiritual means. Elder Bruce R. McConkie once stated, "True religion is revealed religion; it is not a creation of man's devising; it comes from God. . . . God stands revealed or he remains forever unknown, and the things of God are and can be known only by and through the Spirit of God."[11] Though individual revelation is seen as an essential aspect of confirming true doctrine for each person, in the theology of the restored Church of Jesus Christ, only those sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators are authorized to reveal or declare new doctrine.

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9. C. Terry Warner, "Truth," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism,* ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 4:1490.

10. As taught by D. Todd Christofferson in "Truth Endures," address to Church Educational System religious educators, January 26, 2018, https://www.churchofjesus christ.org/broadcasts/article/evening-with-a-general-authority/2018/01/truth-endures ?lang=eng.

11. Bruce R. McConkie, "The Lord's People Receive Revelation," *Ensign* 1, no. 6 (June 1971): 77.

Truth, Doctrine, and the Role of Prophets

Latter-day Saints differ from most other Christians in believing that God continues to reveal truth through living prophets.[12] Joseph Smith stated that it is through this priesthood or prophetic channel that "all knowledge, doctrine, the plan of salvation and every important ~~matter~~ truth is revealed from heaven."[13] Thus, Latter-day Saints continue to believe that true doctrine is revealed through prophets. These prophets are accepted as the authoritative mouthpiece of God as the first section in the Doctrine and Covenants states: "Whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same" (D&C 1:38).

With the belief that a perfect God reveals eternal truths directly to prophetic servants, it might seem that Church members would largely feel secure in their knowledge of most truth or doctrine. Though probably accurate on several core doctrines, this security becomes less sure as we move further away from that core.[14] Adding to the challenge is the reality that some beliefs, and more frequently the practices associated with those beliefs, have varied over time. Though practice and belief are not synonymous, changes in either add to the complexity of interpretation. This has led some members to ask, "If our understanding of belief 'x' has changed, how do I know that our understanding of belief 'y' won't change sometime in the future?" The concept of continuing revelation opens an interpretive door for such a reality and begs for further clarity regarding what changing beliefs mean as well as what beliefs can or cannot change.

Since the theology of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ stresses the role of prophets in declaring doctrine, prophetic reliability becomes an important consideration. Beginning with Joseph Smith, prophets have repeatedly sought to add nuance to members' understanding of the role of a prophet. Joseph stated that "a Prophet was a Prophet only,

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12. "Prophets," in *True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference,* ed. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 129.

13. "Instruction on Priesthood, Circa 5 October 1840," 1, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 5, 2021, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/instruction -on-priesthood-circa-5-october-1840/1; see also James E. Faust, "The Key of the Knowl-edge of God," *Ensign* 34, no. 11 (November 2004): 52.

14. A national survey has found that strong majorities of those who identify as Mormons agree on such major doctrinal issues regarding Christ's resurrection (98%), eternal families (95%), modern prophets (94%), and the Book of Mormon (91%). "Mor-mons in America—Certain in Their Beliefs, Uncertain of Their Place in Society," Pew Research Center, January 12, 2012, http://www.pewforum.org/2012/01/12/mormons-in -america-executive-summary/.

when he was acting as such."[15] Thus, not everything a prophet says is a doctrinal declaration.[16] The Lord revealed to Joseph that God gave revelation "unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, [so] that they might come to understanding" (D&C 1:24). As one Latter-day Saint scholar explained, "Revelation is communication in which God is a flawless, divine encoder, but mortals are the decoders. Various kinds of 'noise' prevent perfect understanding." Even though in traditional belief, prophets are the most trustworthy of "decoders," they both receive and share revelation in a cultural and linguistic context. The same scholar goes on to quote Joseph's statements bemoaning the inadequacy of language to convey the revelatory truths he was receiving. "He [Joseph] considered it 'an awful responsibility to write in the name of the Lord,' as he put it, largely because he felt confined by what he called the 'total darkness of paper pen and Ink and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect Language.'"[17]

Though prophets have taught from the days of Joseph Smith that they are not infallible, they and other Church leaders continue to teach that God reveals his will to his prophets and that God holds people accountable for their response to those revelations. For instance, Joseph sought to balance the reality of a fallible prophet with the ability to trust in the revelations he received when he taught, "I never told you I was perfect; but there is no error in the revelations which I have taught."[18] Probably the most famous of such statements came from Wilford Woodruff when he declared, "The Lord will never permit me nor any other man who stands as President of this Church, to lead you astray."[19] Perhaps more

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15. "History, 1838–1856, Volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843]," 1464 (February 8, 1843), Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 5, 2021, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-d-1-1-august-1842-1-july-1843/107.

16. Joseph complained that "he did not enjoy the right vouchsafed to every American citizen—that of free speech. He said that when he ventured to give his private opinion, his words were often garbled and their meaning twisted. And then given out as the word of the Lord because they came from him." Jesse W. Crosby, quoted in *They Knew the Prophet: Personal Accounts from over 100 People Who Knew Joseph Smith,* ed. Hyrum L. Andrus and Helen Mae Andrus (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1974), 144.

17. Steven C. Harper, "'That They Might Come to Understanding': Revelation as Process," in *You Shall Have My Word: Exploring the Text of the Doctrine and Covenants,* ed. Scott C. Esplin, Richard O. Cowan, and Rachel Cope (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2012), 21.

18. "History, 1838–1856, Volume F-1 [1 May 1844–8 August 1844]," 21 (May 12, 1844), Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 5, 2021, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-f-1-1-may-1844-8-august-1844/27.

19. Wilford Woodruff, "Remarks by President George Q. Cannon and President Wilford Woodruff, at the Sixty-First Semi-annual General Conference of The Church of

now than ever, with the abundance of information and at times disinformation regarding past and current prophets accessible with a single mouse click, some Church members struggle to know where to draw the line between acknowledging prophetic fallibility while adhering to scriptural mandates to follow the prophet.

From the increasing number of talks and lessons focusing on these issues in the last few decades, it seems obvious that the Church leadership recognizes the challenge members face and that they are seeking to assist in resolving it.[20] This assistance appears to take a two-pronged approach. First, Church leadership is regularly teaching that members need to support each other in their search for truth by showing more charity and acceptance as they work their way through the process of discovering truth.[21] Second, General Authorities have made a concerted effort, as will be illustrated below, to help members define the parameters surrounding the Church's doctrine to better enable members at large to differentiate between what is considered authoritative and what is considered speculative.

Defining Doctrine

In both ancient and Restoration scriptures, the meaning of the word *doctrine* often changes depending on whether it is in singular or plural form. In most instances, *doctrine* in the singular refers to the authoritative and authentic teachings of God.[22] However, sometimes when it is used in the plural form, it is in reference to the teachings of men or even false teachings.[23] From the beginning of the Restoration, the word

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Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, October 6, 1891, Immediately Following the Adoption by the General Assembly of the Manifesto Issued by President Wilford Woodruff in Relation to Plural Marriage," *Deseret Evening News,* October 11, 1890, 2.

20. The following are just four of many such talks: Neil L. Andersen, "Trial of Your Faith," *Ensign* 42, no. 11 (November 2012): 39–42; M. Russell Ballard, "Stay in the Boat and Hold On!," *Ensign* 44, no. 11 (November 2014): 89–91; Jeffrey R. Holland, "'Lord, I Believe,'" *Ensign* 43, no. 5 (May 2013): 93–95; Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Be Not Afraid, Only Believe," *Ensign* 45, no. 11 (November 2015): 76–79.

21. Two examples are M. Russell Ballard, "To the Saints in the Utah South Area," address broadcast to the stakes of the Utah South Area, September 13, 2015, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/prophets-and-apostles/unto-all-the-world/to-the-saints-in-the-utah-south-area?lang=eng; Uchtdorf, "Be Not Afraid, Only Believe," 76–79.

22. For a few examples, see Doctrine and Covenants 10:62; 11:16; 68:25; 97:14; 128:7; 2 Nephi 31:2; 32:6; Jacob 7:2; Helaman 11:22; 3 Nephi 11:28; Matthew 7:28; 22:33; Mark 1:22; 11:18; Luke 4:32; John 7:16; 18:19.

23. For a few examples, see Doctrine and Covenants 46:7; 2 Nephi 3:12; 28:9; Alma 1:16; Matthew 15:9; Mark 7:7; 1 Timothy 4:1; Hebrews 13:9. For a more thorough

doctrine has been used by Church leaders to simply connote something that is taught or religious instruction with little specificity of meaning besides the fact that it was a teaching.[24]

However, defining doctrine as simply any religious instruction leaves many modern members unable to differentiate between a teaching that is considered "authoritative" and a teaching that is simply the best understanding of the person speaking. Over the last several decades, Church leaders have begun to define the term *doctrine* more tightly with the result being greater clarity on what can be relied on as fixed doctrine.

Defining Doctrine—
The Last Three Decades—General Authorities

In order to determine how General Authorities, especially members of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve Apostles, have been using the word *doctrine,* a systematic review of every occurrence of the word *doctrine* in general conference over the last three decades (over two thousand occurrences) was made.[25] By reviewing every instance of the word rather than simply looking at select, well-known statements, the hope was that it would capture patterns of usage that might best show how those tasked with establishing the doctrine of the church, meaning the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve, are using the word today.[26] As has been understood for much of the Church's history, these two bodies have a special stewardship when it comes to establishing doctrine in the Church. Elder D. Todd Christofferson explained this concept in general conference by quoting from President J. Reuben Clark Jr. of the First Presidency.

> In 1954, President J. Reuben Clark Jr., then a counselor in the First Presidency, explained how doctrine is promulgated in the Church and the preeminent role of the President of the Church. Speaking of members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, he

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investigation into how scriptures use the word *doctrine,* see M. Gerald Bradford and Larry E. Dahl, "Meaning, Source, and History of Doctrine," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism,* 1:393–97.

24. Anthony Sweat, Michael H. MacKay, and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, "Doctrine: Models to Evaluate Types and Sources of Latter-day Saint Teachings," *Religious Educator* 17, no. 3 (2016): 103.

25. The search was performed using the LDS General Conference Corpus at https://www.lds-general-conference.org/.

26. D. Todd Christofferson, "The Doctrine of Christ," *Ensign* 42, no. 5 (May 2012): 86–89; Howard W. Hunter, "'Exceeding Great and Precious Promises,'" *Ensign* 24, no. 11 (November 1994): 7–9; Gordon B. Hinckley, "God Is at the Helm," *Ensign* 24, no. 5 (May 1994): 53–60.

stated: "[We] should [bear] in mind that some of the General Authorities have had assigned to them a special calling; they possess a special gift; they are sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators, which gives them a special spiritual endowment in connection with their teaching of the people. They have the right, the power, and authority to declare the mind and will of God to his people, subject to the over-all power and authority of the President of the Church. Others of the General Authorities are not given this special spiritual endowment and authority covering their teaching; they have a resulting limitation, and the resulting limitation upon their power and authority in teaching applies to every other officer and member of the Church, for none of them is spiritually endowed as a prophet, seer, and revelator. Furthermore, as just indicated, the President of the Church has a further and special spiritual endowment in this respect, for he is the Prophet, Seer, and Revelator for the whole Church."[27]

Since most Church members base their understanding of Church doctrine on what the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve are teaching, those teachings would seem to be a crucial starting point to understanding how modern Church members might be defining doctrine. Most of the two-thousand-plus references to the word *doctrine* in the last three decades were not efforts to define the word but rather simply to use the word. However, the systematic review of every instance where efforts were made by members of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve to define doctrine yielded three specific criteria that were repeatedly used: the first stressed the unchanging, eternal nature of true doctrine; the second stressed the authoritative sources from which doctrine may come; and the third stressed the appropriate scope or subject matter for official doctrine (see fig. 1).[28]

In 1841, Joseph Smith taught that "every principle proceeding from God is eternal."[29] This concept has been repeatedly expressed by modern prophets. Elder Boyd K. Packer stated that "procedures, programs, the administrative policies, even some patterns of organization are subject to change.

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27. Christofferson, "Doctrine of Christ," 86–87, quoting from J. Reuben Clark Jr., "When Are Church Leaders' Words Entitled to Claim of Scripture?," *Church News,* July 31, 1954, 9–10. See also Doctrine and Covenants 28:1–2, 6–7, 11–13.

28. These three criteria are not meant to be an authoritative declaration of how to determine doctrine but rather a systematic analysis of how members of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve have done so over the last several decades.

29. "Discourse, 5 January 1841, as Reported by Unidentified Scribe," 1 (January 5, 1841), Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 5, 2021, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-5-january-1841-as-reported-by-unidentified-scribe/1.
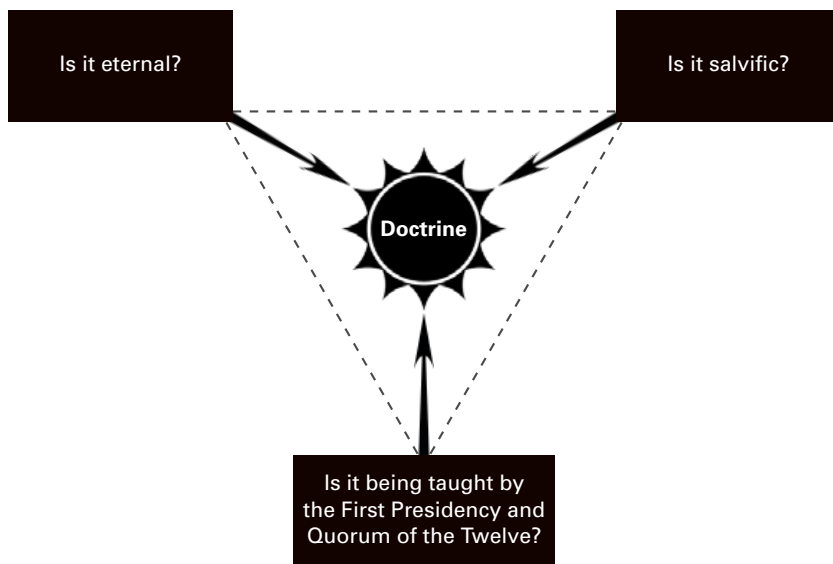
Figure 1. Graphical representation of model for determining doctrine proposed herein by the author.

We are quite free, indeed, quite obliged to alter them from time to time. But the *principles,* the *doctrines, never* change."[30] President James E. Faust explained that "one cannot successfully attack true principles or doctrine, because they are eternal."[31] President Dieter F. Uchtdorf mirrored Boyd K. Packer when he taught, "Procedures, programs, policies, and patterns of organization are helpful for our spiritual progress here on earth, but let's not forget that they are subject to change. In contrast, the core of the gospel—the doctrine and the principles—will never change."[32] Especially in the last three decades, the eternal, unchanging nature of doctrine is the most frequently referenced criterion. In addition to talks by members of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve, this criterion has continually been stressed in the curricular material of the Church as well.[33]

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30. Boyd K. Packer, "Principles," *Ensign* 15, no. 3 (March 1985): 8, emphasis original. See also Gordon B. Hinckley, "This Work Is Concerned with People," *Ensign* 25, no. 5 (May 1995): 51–53.

31. James E. Faust, "Lord, I Believe; Help Thou Mine Unbelief," *Ensign* 33, no. 11 (November 2003): 21–22.

32. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Developing Christlike Attributes," *Ensign* 38, no. 10 (October 2008): 5.

33. For examples, see *Teachings of the Living Prophets Student Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2010); *New-Teacher Training Resource:*

The second criterion that has been emphasized over the last three decades is that true doctrine is taught regularly and consistently by members of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve. Elder Neil L. Anderson explained that "there is an important principle that governs the doctrine of the Church. The doctrine is taught by all 15 members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve. It is not hidden in an obscure paragraph of one talk. True principles are taught frequently and by many."[34] In line with the scriptural mandate that every decision made by the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve "must be by the unanimous voice of the same,"[35] they have emphasized the authority that flows from the combined voice of members of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve to declare doctrine. "With divine inspiration, the First Presidency (the prophet and his two counselors) and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (the second-highest governing body of the Church) counsel together to establish doctrine that is consistently proclaimed in official Church publications. This doctrine resides in the four 'standard works' of scripture . . . , official declarations and proclamations, and the Articles of Faith."[36] This last sentence points to the pivotal role of canonized scriptures and official proclamations and declarations as repositories for the doctrines of the Church.

Lastly, perhaps as part of the definition that doctrines are eternal in nature, some leaders have stressed that doctrine is that which pertains to eternity and specifically to salvation. In other words, doctrine is salvific in nature. Perhaps Elder David A. Bednar explained this most cogently: "A gospel doctrine is a truth—a truth of salvation revealed by a loving

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A Teacher-Improvement Companion to the Gospel Teaching and Learning Handbook (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016); *Teaching in the Savior's Way* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015).

34. Neil L. Andersen, "Trial of Your Faith," *Ensign* 42, no. 11 (November 2012): 41. See also Christofferson, "Doctrine of Christ," 88, for a similar statement.

35. Doctrine and Covenants 107:27. The following statement from President Gordon B. Hinckley reinforces this principle: "But any major questions of policy, procedures, programs, or doctrine are considered deliberately and prayerfully by the First Presidency and the Twelve together. These two quorums, the Quorum of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve, meeting together, with every man having total freedom to express himself, consider every major question. And now I quote again from the word of the Lord: 'And every decision made by either of these quorums must be by the unanimous voice of the same; that is, every member in each quorum must be agreed to its decisions.'" Gordon B. Hinckley, "God Is at the Helm," 54.

36. "Approaching Mormon Doctrine," Newsroom, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, May 4, 2007, https://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/approaching -mormon-doctrine.

Heavenly Father. Gospel doctrines are eternal, do not change, and pertain to the eternal progression and exaltation of Heavenly Father's sons and daughters. Doctrines such as the nature of the Godhead, the plan of happiness, and the Atonement of Jesus Christ are foundational, fundamental, and comprehensive. The core doctrines of the gospel of Jesus Christ are relatively few in number."[37] General Authorities often refer to this aspect of doctrine with the words "saving doctrine" or "saving truths"[38] or "essential to (or for) salvation."[39] This final criterion creates an interesting differentiation between truth and doctrine: all doctrine is true, but not all truth is doctrine.[40] A teaching that is true but not necessary or pertaining to our salvation, such as the commonly taught reality that there are seven dispensation heads, would be a historical truth but not necessarily a salvific doctrine.

As clear as these three criteria are on the surface, there are still many ways members of the Church seek to apply them. Furthermore, though each criterion provides a positive definition of doctrine, it might be that their greater influence is in delineating that which would not be considered doctrine by using these criteria together. For example, the criterion that doctrine is eternal has frequently been used to separate doctrine (which according to this criterion does not change) from practices and

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37. David A. Bednar, *Increase in Learning—Spiritual Patterns for Obtaining Your Own Answers* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 151.

38. For examples, see Neal A. Maxwell, "'Endure It Well,'" *Ensign* 20, no. 5 (May 1990): 34; Neil L. Andersen, "'Whom the Lord Calls, the Lord Qualifies,'" *Ensign* 23, no. 5 (May 1993): 82; M. Russell Ballard, "Standing for Truth and Right," *Ensign* 27, no. 11 (November 1997): 38; Henry B. Eyring, "The Power of Teaching Doctrine," *Ensign* 29, no. 5 (May 1999): 73–75; Jeffrey R. Holland, "A Prayer for the Children," *Ensign* 33, no. 5 (May 2003): 85.

39. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Godhead and the Plan of Salvation," *Ensign* 47, no. 5 (May 2017): 103; Dean M. Davies, "A Sure Foundation," *Ensign* 44, no. 5 (May 2013): 10; Dallin H. Oaks, "No Other Gods," *Ensign* 43, no. 11 (November 2013): 74; Robert D. Hales, "Agency: Essential to the Plan of Life," *Ensign* 40, no. 11 (November 2010): 24–25; James E. Faust, "Called and Chosen," *Ensign* 35, no. 11 (November 2005): 54; Richard C. Edgley, "'We Care Enough to Send Our Very Best,'" *Ensign* 26, no. 11 (November 1996): 63; Robert D. Hales, "Gratitude for the Goodness of God," *Ensign* 22, no. 5 (May 1992): 63.

40. Loyd Ericson points to this reality: "Furthermore, just because a statement about a religious matter happens to be true, its truthfulness is likewise not a sufficient condition for being doctrine. For example, it may be the case that the mortal Jesus was actually married or that Earth was created less than 13,000 years ago. Even if those were true unbeknownst to us, that would not be sufficient for it to be doctrine. Like the location of the Potomac River, Church doctrine is silent on these matters." Ericson, "Challenges of Defining Mormon Doctrine," 80.

policies (which also may be authoritative in nature but are subject to change). However, this becomes more complicated for members as it becomes clear that many teachings have both "doctrinal" and "practical" aspects. Most members would agree that Christ's Atonement is an official doctrine of the Church. It is believed to be an eternal necessity for our salvation that is taught regularly by members of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve. However, the Atonement also consists of an act (Christ's suffering in Gethsemane and suffering and death at Golgotha) that happened at a specific time and place. Though the reality and necessity of the Atonement falls neatly into the category of doctrine, the specific means and mechanism by which it is brought to pass likely does not. The Atonement is also commemorated through ordinances that, though based on an eternal doctrine, have changed in nature several times.[41] It may seem strange to say that the sacrament is not necessarily a doctrine, and yet if doctrine is eternal in nature, then the sacrament would likely be considered a practice (which had a beginning and which has changed in form several times) even as it is based on a doctrine (the Atonement, which does not change). The same could be said of such foundational teachings in the Church as the Word of Wisdom, family home evening, or even the temple endowment. According to the criterion of eternality, each is a time-bound practice that is based on eternal doctrine. The practice could therefore change without calling into question the veracity of the doctrine upon which it is based.

These realities raise the point that a teaching can be considered an authoritative, even revealed, aspect of the Church, but not necessarily a doctrine according to the three criteria the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve have emphasized over the last few decades. To say that the sacrament or the Word of Wisdom are not necessarily official doctrines is not to say that they are not official teachings, considered necessary for our standing with God, based on revelation, and true. In the theology of the Church, God is able to reveal not only eternal doctrines and principles (unchanging verities) but also time-bound commandments, practices, and policies. Determining who holds and exercises the priesthood serves as an example of this principle. Priesthood and priesthood keys are

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41. What began as the sacrificial ordinance with Adam was changed in its details within the law of Moses, which was changed by the Savior into his sacrament, which was further developed as Joseph Smith made modifications in its practice. See Doctrine and Covenants 27.

listed as one of the basic "doctrines" of the Church.[42] And yet the guidelines specifying who is permitted to hold or exercise priesthood authority clearly do not constitute an eternal doctrine. It has changed numerous times from the days of Adam. Accordingly, who holds or exercises priesthood authority, as well as the organization of the priesthood, are policies or practices—subject to change. As President Dallin H. Oaks explained in regard to who holds and exercises the priesthood, "The First Presidency and the Council of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve, who preside over the Church, are empowered to make many decisions affecting Church policies and procedures—matters such as the location of Church buildings and the ages for missionary service. But even though these presiding authorities hold and exercise all of the keys delegated to men in this dispensation, they are not free to alter the divinely decreed pattern that only men will hold offices in the priesthood."[43]

A further example would be the plan of salvation. Most members would agree that the entire plan of salvation is doctrine. Yet the Creation, Fall, and Atonement all include events that happened in a specific time and place. Adding further nuance to using eternality as a criterion is the reality that our collective understanding of each part of the plan continues to grow. It seems obvious that what Moses understood about the creation process would differ from what Joseph Smith understood, which would differ from what today's prophets understand. So, even though the doctrine of the Creation has not changed, the understanding of different aspects of the Creation continues to develop. Furthermore, the reality of God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are clearly doctrines of the Church, and yet Joseph Smith's understanding and teachings regarding their nature evolved throughout his ministry.[44] Add to this the myriad of teachings from general and local leaders of the Church and it becomes clear that even though defining doctrine as eternal differentiates it from other teachings, it does not change the fact that members' understanding of even the most fundamental doctrines is still imperfect.

Adding a need for additional nuance in our efforts to understand doctrine is the reality that true doctrine is often mixed with man-made explanations and reasoning. Dallin H. Oaks explained, "If you read the

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42. *Basic Doctrines* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013), 5.

43. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood," *Ensign* 44, no. 5 (May 2014): 50.

44. For further detail, see Bradford and Dahl, "Meaning, Source, and History of Doctrine," 1:393–97.

scriptures with this question in mind, 'Why did the Lord command this or why did he command that,' you find that in less than one in a hundred commands was any reason given. It's not the pattern of the Lord to give reasons. We can put reasons to revelation. We can put reasons to commandments. When we do, we're on our own. . . . Let's don't make the mistake that's been made in the past, here and in other areas, trying to put reasons to revelation. The reasons turn out to be man-made to a great extent."[45]

The second criterion repeatedly used over the last three decades to distinguish doctrine from other teachings in the Church refers to the authoritative nature of the source of the teaching more than it does to the teaching itself. In the theology of the restored Church of Jesus Christ, only the prophet is authorized to announce or declare new doctrine. In addition, it has been regularly taught that the Council of the First Presidency has special authority over Church doctrine.[46] And as was pointed out above, members of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve have the responsibility to establish the doctrines of the Church that are "consistently proclaimed in official Church publications." However, members of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve teach many things besides eternal doctrines, such as time-bound policies and practices. So the fact that something is taught regularly by members of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve does not automatically make it a doctrine. However, any teaching not taught by them would not be considered an official doctrine by this criterion. All members, even the prophet himself, are free to hold opinions and beliefs that may or may not be official doctrine. However, by requiring multiple witnesses within the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve, only that which is agreed on and taught regularly by

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45. Dallin H. Oaks, *Life's Lessons Learned: Personal Reflections* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 68–69. In addition, two Latter-day Saint scholars also explained, "Doctrines, however, no matter how pure, do not exist in a vacuum. We encounter them through teachings, programs, manuals, personal interactions, and institutional forms and practices. And in the process, we occasionally find the pure gospel entangled with unfortunate ideas, pharisaical behavior, legalistic thinking, judgmentalism, and rules based more on tradition than inspiration." See Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 103.

46. See Stephen L. Richards, in *One Hundred Ninth 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, 1938), 115–16; Ezra Taft Benson, "The Gospel Teacher and His Message," in *Charge to Religious Educators,* 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982), 51–52; James E. Faust, "The Abundant Life," *Ensign* 15, no. 11 (November 1985): 9.

the two highest governing bodies could be considered a possible official doctrine. Though several scriptural verses and statements by Church leaders have been made that state that the President of the Church is able, by himself, to declare doctrine,[47] the normative practice from the death of the prophet Joseph Smith through today is to get the ratification of both governing counsels before declaring what might be considered officially binding—whether that teaching is a doctrine, a policy, or a practice. As explained by Harold B. Lee, "the only one authorized to bring forth any new doctrine is the President of the Church, who, when he does, will declare it as revelation from God, and it will be so accepted by the Council of the Twelve and sustained by the body of the Church."[48] This process of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve counseling together under the leadership of the President of the Church applies to both declaring new doctrine and official church practice. An example of this would be President Spencer W. Kimball's revelation ending the priesthood restriction. The receipt of the revelation was not pronounced to the Church until the presiding quorums of the Church received their own witness of the truthfulness of the revelation, so that the revelation could then be unanimously presented to the Church membership for sustaining, and thus it became binding on the Church.[49]

An important caveat regarding the authoritative nature of the source of a teaching is that though the source may increase the likelihood of something taught being a doctrine, in and of itself it would be insufficient to make the determination. This is because every source—be it a person (such as a prophet, Apostle, or Seventy), a setting (such as general conference), or even the scriptures—can teach or contain teachings that are not eternal in nature or salvific (which will be discussed further below). One scholar explained that "it is not uncommon to hear someone say that anything taught in general conference is 'official doctrine.' Such a standard makes the place where something is said rather than what is said the standard of truth. Nor is something doctrine simply because it was said by someone who holds a particular office

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47. See Doctrine and Covenants 43:1–7; and Christofferson, "Doctrine of Christ," 88.

48. Harold B. Lee, address, in *The First Area General Conference for Germany, Austria, Holland, Italy, Switzerland, France, Belgium, and Spain of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, held in Munich, Germany, August 24–26, 1973, with Reports and Discourses* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1974), 69.

49. Edward L. Kimball, "Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood," *BYU Studies* 47, no. 2 (2008): 44–59.

or position."[50] This is because the source—for example, an Apostle at general conference—may teach not only eternal doctrines but current policies, practices, or other teachings of a more time-bound nature. One obvious example is the announcement of the move to a two-hour Sunday meeting schedule and the "Come, Follow Me" curriculum at the October 2018 general conference.[51]

Finally, the criterion that doctrine pertains to our salvation further limits what could be considered official doctrine to those issues which are most central to our theology. However, it may be challenging for members to know what exactly salvific means. In the spirit of Doctrine and Covenants 29:34–35, if all commandments are spiritual to God, might they all be salvific? As with the other two criteria mentioned above, the power of this criterion may be in what it excludes more than in what it includes. The fact that exaltation requires a physical, eternal body would make the Creation a salvific doctrine. However, the specific method God used to create our bodies seems to lie outside of what we need to know for salvation. Interestingly, none of the three criteria currently being emphasized by the presiding authorities would be effective in isolation. But when used together, they provide a more definitive set of principles to evaluate the doctrinal status of any given issue.

Defining Doctrine— The Last Three Decades—Lay Members

Over the past few decades, there have been several attempts by religious educators and other academics outside of the general leadership of the Church to create criteria by which to navigate doctrinal issues.[52]

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50. Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Answers: Straightforward Answers to Tough Gospel Questions* (Deseret Book: Salt Lake City, 1998), 213–14.

51. See "Changes Help Balance Gospel Instruction at Home and at Church," *Ensign* 48, no. 11 (November 2018): 117–19.

52. This study will focus on the last three decades. However, there have been numerous works written since the days of Joseph Smith that have sought to explain Church doctrine. The following comes from Eleanor Knowles, "Treatises on Doctrine," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism,* 1:404. "Following is a list of books that have made significant contributions to the understanding of doctrine (unless otherwise noted, these works were published in Salt Lake City): Parley P. Pratt, *A Voice of Warning* (New York, 1837) and *Key to the Science of Theology* (1856); Orson Pratt, *An Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records* (Edinburgh, 1840); Orson Spencer, *Spencer's Letters* (Liverpool and London, 1852); John Taylor, *Mediation and Atonement* (1882) and *The Government of God* (1884); Franklin D. Richards and James Little, *A Compendium of the Doctrines of the Gospel* (1882);

None of these individuals have claimed authority to define doctrine or asserted that the criteria they highlighted were definitive. Rather, each has based their criteria on what the general officers of the Church have taught, listed above. This makes sense when the theology in question is based on the concept that modern prophets, seers, and revelators are the only people authorized to announce and declare official doctrine.[53]

From Most to Least Authoritative

Shortly after the end of the priesthood restriction, Armand Mauss, then a professor of sociology at Washington State University, proposed criteria for evaluating and categorizing Church teachings.[54] However, rather than defining what is or what is not doctrine, Mauss categorized teachings into four separate types of "doctrine": (1) canon doctrine (that which was received by revelation and submitted to and sustained by the Church), (2) official doctrine (official statements from the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve Apostles), (3) authoritative doctrine (teachings by authoritative sources, both ecclesiastical and scholarly), and (4) popular doctrine (basically folklore).

B. H. Roberts, *The Gospel* (Liverpool, 1888), *Mormon Doctrine of Deity and Jesus Christ: The Revelation of God* (1903), and *The Seventy's Course in Theology,* 5 vols. (1907–1912); James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith* (1899) and *Jesus the Christ* (1915); Orson F. Whitney, *Gospel Themes* (1914) and *Saturday Night Thoughts* (1921); Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (1919); Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young,* ed. John A. Widtsoe (1926); John A. Widtsoe, *Priesthood and Church Government* (1939), *A Rational Theology* (1945), and *Evidences and Reconciliations,* 3 vols. in 1 (1960); Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith,* comp. by Joseph Fielding Smith (1938); Orson Pratt, *Orson Pratt's Works,* ed. Parker P. Robison (1945), and *Masterful Discourses of Orson Pratt*, ed. N. B. Lundwall (1946); Milton R. Hunter, *The Gospel Through the Ages* (1945); Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Latter-day Prophets Speak* (1948); J. Reuben Clark, Jr., *On the Way to Immortality and Eternal Life* (1949); *Writings of Parley P. Pratt,* ed. Parker P. Robison (1952); Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (1958, rev. 1966); Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (1969); and George Q. Cannon, *Gospel Truth,* ed. Jerreld Newquist, 2 vols. (1972, 1974)."

53. See Doctrine and Covenants 28:1–7; 43:1–7; 81:2; 112:30.

54. Armand L. Mauss, "Fading of the Pharaoh's Curse: The Decline and Fall of the Priesthood Ban against Blacks in the Mormon Church," in *Neither White or Black: Mormon Scholars Confront the Race Issue in a Universal Church,* ed. Lester E. Bush Jr. and Armand L. Mauss (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1984), 173–75. Note that as with each of the following sets of criteria, this paper will provide only a brief listing of the said criteria and point to the ramifications that flow from them. For a fuller picture of the rationale and basis behind each set of criteria, the reader is encouraged to thoroughly review each publication.
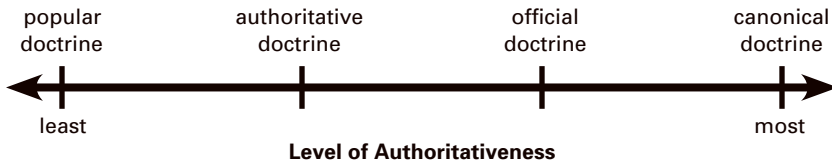
Figure 2. Graphical representation of model for determining doctrine first published in Mauss, "Fading of the Pharaoh's Curse," 173–75, by current, not original, author.

As can be seen, Mauss's categorization serves to delineate Church teachings from the most to the least authoritative in nature (see fig. 2). This approach is similar to the second criterion the leadership of the Church is currently emphasizing, outlined above. Rather than focus on the nature of the teaching itself, it focuses on the source of the teaching. Mauss's first two categories largely align with the concept that only those sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators can be considered a modern source for doctrine, in addition to the standard works. This approach divides the teachings of these authorities into canonized teachings (that which has been sustained by the general membership of the Church as authoritative and binding) from other official teachings of the First Presidency and the Quorum of Twelve. His third category could contain a mixture of what might be defined as doctrine today with other teachings that might not. His fourth category, popular doctrine, would generally not be considered doctrine based on the three criteria of a teaching being eternal, authoritative, and salvific. Mauss himself makes it clear that "popular doctrine" lacks any authoritative source, though he still refers to it as "doctrine," and many modern members may consider some of these teachings official doctrines.

Sustained as Official or Canonical

Stephen Robinson, past chair of the Department of Ancient Scripture in Religious Education at Brigham Young University, proposed one simple criterion to determine if something could be considered official Church doctrine: Has the doctrine been sustained by the Church membership as official and canonical?[55] This would effectively limit official doctrine to what is contained in the canonically accepted scriptures (see fig. 3).

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55. Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 13–18. Robinson references the source of this criterion to B. H. Roberts: "The Church has confined the sources of doctrine by which it is willing to be bound before the world

At first glance, Robinson's definition might seem to be quite restrictive, and yet it can also be seen as one of the most expansive criteria. His criterion would restrict any statement made by prophets, seers, and revelators from being considered doctrine unless it has a parallel in the scriptures. This is not a strange concept; several authority figures have spoken similarly.[56] However, the scriptures contain many genres of material such as history, poetry, and ancient cultural practices that would not be considered doctrine today.

Is the doctrine sustained by Church membership?

☑ Yes ☐ No

Figure 3. Graphical representation of model for determining doctrine first published in Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?,* 13–18, by current, not original, author.

In addition, the eighth article of faith qualifies our belief that scripture, especially the Bible, as it comes to us today is word perfect with the phrase "as far as it is translated correctly." Joseph Smith himself took issue with certain parts of the Bible: "I am now going to take exceptions to the present translation of the bible in relation to these matters; our latitude and longitude can be determined in the original Hebrew with far greater accuracy than in the English version. There is a grand distinction between the actual meaning of the Prophets and the present translation."[57] None of this calls into question the value of scriptures in Latter-day Saint thought. Clearly, the Church believes and teaches that the scriptures contain true doctrine. These caveats to using the canonical

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to the things that God has revealed, and which the Church has officially accepted, and those alone. These would include the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price; these have been repeatedly accepted and endorsed by the Church in general conference assembled, and are the only sources of absolute appeal for our doctrine." F. W. Otterstrom, "Answer Given to 'Ten Reasons Why "Christians" Can Not Fellowship with Latter-day Saints': Discourse Delivered in Salt Lake Tabernacle July 10, 1921, by Elder Brigham H. Roberts," *Deseret News,* July 23, 1921, 7.

56. For examples, see Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith,* comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956), 3:203–4; Harold B. Lee, "Using the Scriptures in Our Church Assignments," *Improvement Era* 72, no. 1 (January 1969): 13; Harold B. Lee, "Viewpoint of a Giant" (address to religious educators, Brigham Young University, July 18, 1968), 6; Theodore M. Burton, "'Blessed Are the Peacemakers,'" *Ensign* 4, no. 11 (November 1974): 55; Joseph Fielding Smith, as quoted in *Church News* editorial, April 17, 1983.

57. "History, 1838–1856, Volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843]," 1523 (April 8, 1843), Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 5, 2021, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper -summary/history-1838-1856-volume-d-1-1-august-1842-1-july-1843/166. He further stated, "There are many things in the Bible which do not as they now stand, accord with the Revelations of the Holy Ghost to me," 1573.

status of a teaching as the primary or even only criterion for determining doctrine simply show that further criteria would be needed in determining what is and what is not doctrine.

Authoritative Sources in Line with Current Prophetic Leadership

Robert L. Millet, a former dean of Religious Education at Brigham Young University, has published numerous articles and book chapters on better understanding the doctrine of the Church.[58] As with others who attempt this, Millet always makes it clear that only those sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators have the right to announce or declare new doctrine.[59] In one of his articles, Millet started with a criterion similar to Robinson: (1) Is the teaching "found within the four standard works?" To this he added, (2) Is it contained "within official declarations or proclamations?" (3) "Is it discussed in general conference or other official gatherings by general Church leaders today?" and (4) "Is it found in the general handbooks or approved curriculum of the Church today?"[60] (see fig. 4).

After canonical status, Millet broadens what might be considered true doctrine by including official declarations or proclamations. This would be fairly uncontroversial to most, though not all, members of the Church. His final two criteria privilege what is currently being taught in the Church. This makes sense in a Church that emphasizes the need for modern prophets.[61] As with the first two sets of criteria, Millet's criteria

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58. The following lists several of these articles or book chapters as contained in footnote 2 in Ericson, "Challenges of Defining Mormon Doctrine." See also Robert L. Millet, "What Do We Really Believe? Identifying Doctrinal Parameters within Mormonism," in *Discourses in Mormon Theology: Philosophical and Theological Possibilities*, ed. James M. McLachlan and Loyd Ericson (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 265–81. A previous version of this essay was also published in "What Is Our Doctrine?" *Religious Educator* 4, no. 3 (2003): 15–33. Also selections from this essay, including his authoritative model, are included in his latest books: *Getting at the Truth: Responding to Difficult Questions about LDS Beliefs* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), 43–63; *What Happened to the Cross? Distinctive LDS Teachings* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2007), 52–65.

59. "Before beginning this discussion, let me affirm that I understand implicitly that the authority to declare, interpret, and clarify doctrine rests with living apostles and prophets. This article will thus speak only *about* doctrine and in no way attempt to reach beyond my own stewardship." Millet, "What Is Our Doctrine?," 15.

60. Millet, "What Is Our Doctrine?," 19.

61. For examples of conference addresses emphasizing the need for modern prophets, see Neil L. Andersen, "The Voice of the Lord," *Ensign* 47, no. 11 (November 2017):

emphasize the source of the
authoritative teaching more
than any attribute of the
teaching itself. As with most
criteria we have examined,
Millet's might have more
power in excluding teach-
ings from being accepted
as doctrine than including
teachings. It would exclude
as doctrine anything not
currently being taught by
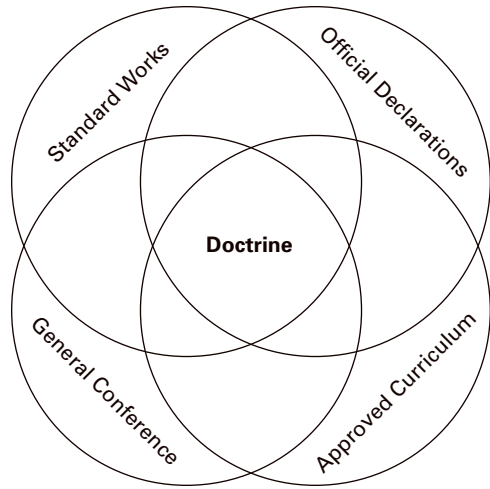or in the most authoritative
sources.

A Hermeneutic Approach

Nathan Oman, a profes-
sor of law at the College of
William & Mary, provided

Figure 4. Graphical representation of model for determining doctrine first published in Millet, "What Is Our Doctrine?" 15–33, by current, not original, author.

a unique approach to determining doctrine.[62] Rather than coming up
with a set of criteria to determine whether or not a teaching is official
doctrine (a formal "rule of recognition"), he posits a theory on how
members actually determine the question for themselves. Drawing from
his legal background, he proposes a "Church Doctrine as integrity" her-
meneutic approach throughout his article published in *Element* based
on a judicial theory called "law as integrity." In this approach, individu-
als seek to fit any new teaching into the context of what he refers to
as "easy cases" (see fig. 5)—other doctrines that are clearly accepted as
truths in the Church. Then they seek to determine the possible doctri-
nal parameters of the questionable teachings by looking at "the previ-
ously decided cases and construct[ing] the best possible argument that
[they] can to justify them." In other words, "when faced with a new

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122–26; D. Todd Christofferson, "The Voice of Warning," *Ensign* 47, no. 5 (May 2017):
108–11; Henry B. Eyring, "Continuing Revelation," *Ensign* 44, no. 11 (November 2014):
70–73; Russell M. Nelson, "Sustaining the Prophets," *Ensign* 44, no. 11 (November
2014): 74–77; Ronald A. Rasband, "Standing with the Leaders of the Church," *Ensign*
46, no. 5 (May 2016): 46–49.

62. Nathan B. Oman, "Jurisprudence and the Problem of Church Doctrine," *Element*
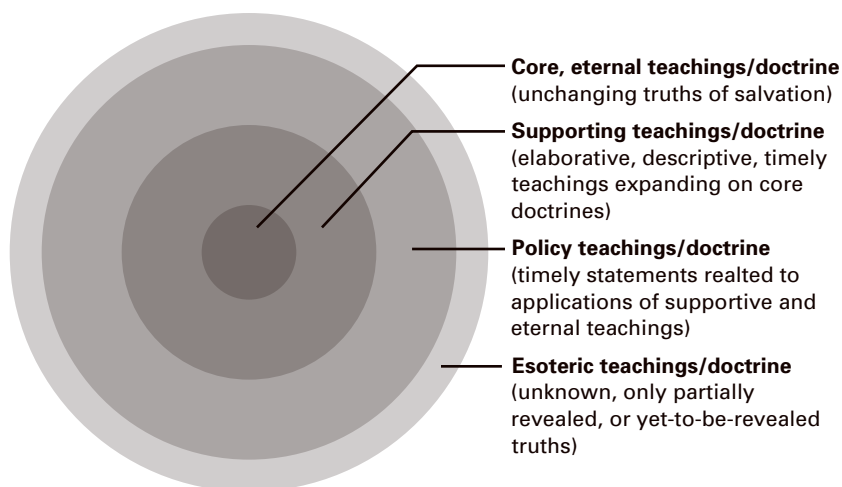2, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 1–19.

Figure 5. Graphical representation of model for determining doctrine first published in Oman, "Jurisprudence and the Problem of Church Doctrine," 1–19, by current, not original, author.

question about Church Doctrine, rather than trying to determine . . . the correct rule of recognition they can simply reason on the basis of clear cases, fitting the new question into a story that will place things in their best possible light."[63] Hence, just as a legal judge uses past precedent (both past decisions and the reasoning of past decisions) to make new judgments on the law, Oman sees members doing the same thing to determine what true doctrine is for themselves.

Again, it is important to point out that this is not an attempt to come up with a specific set of official rules for recognizing doctrine, but an attempt to explain how members can decide for themselves what is and what is not doctrine. This method for determining doctrine is perhaps the least concrete of those considered in this essay. Modeled on judicial precedent, it encourages members to base their decisions on where new teachings would fit with what they already consider settled doctrine and their overall understanding of the gospel. Of course, this requires members to know what settled doctrines, or as Oman calls it, "easy cases" are. As much as this method lacks specificity, in some ways it could encourage a more conservative and maybe a more charitable approach to interpreting doctrine. All decisions on what is to be considered doctrine can only be understood in light of where that teaching fits with more central or core doctrines. In some ways, it encourages the evaluation of doctrine in relation to other doctrines, similar to

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63. Oman, "Jurisprudence," 7, 9–10.

Core, eternal teachings/doctrine
(unchanging truths of salvation)

Supporting teachings/doctrine
(elaborative, descriptive, timely
teachings expanding on core
doctrines)

Policy teachings/doctrine
(timely statements realted to
applications of supportive and
eternal teachings)

Esoteric teachings/doctrine
(unknown, only partially
revealed, or yet-to-be-revealed
truths)

Figure 6. Graphical representation of model for determining doctrine first published in Sweat, MacKay, and Dirkmaat, "Doctrine: Models to Evaluate Types and Sources of Latter-day Teachings," 101–25, by original author. Recreated with permission.

an approach advocated by Elder Neal A. Maxwell. He explained that "orthodoxy ensures balance between the gospel's powerful and correct principles. . . . But the gospel's principles do require synchronization. When . . . isolated, men's interpretations and implementations of these doctrines may be wild."⁶⁴

From Core to Esoteric Teachings

A recent approach to defining doctrine was made by three professors in the Department of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University—Anthony Sweat, Michael MacKay, and Gerrit Dirkmaat.⁶⁵ In an approach reminiscent of Armand Mauss, rather than proposing a system meant to delineate whether something is Church doctrine or not, their model seeks to separate teachings into one of four categories or types in descending order from most to least authoritative (see fig. 6). Their first level is core, eternal doctrines (unchanging truths of

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64. Neal A. Maxwell, "'Behold, the Enemy Is Combined' (D&C 38:12)," *Ensign* 23, no. 5 (May 1993): 78.

65. Anthony Sweat, Michael Hubbard MacKay, and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, "Doctrine: Models to Evaluate Types and Sources of Latter-day Teachings," *Religious Educator* 17, no. 3 (2016): 101–25.

salvation). Their second level is supporting teachings and doctrines (elaborate, descriptive, timely teachings expanding on core doctrines). Their third level is policy teachings and doctrines (timely statements related to applications of supportive and eternal teachings). Their final level is esoteric teachings and doctrines (unknown or only partially revealed or yet-to-be revealed truths).

As with most of the other models, this model focuses on the source of the teachings as much as if not more than the substance of the teaching. It mirrors Mauss's model by dividing teachings into four decreasingly authoritative categories. The model recommends asking four questions when evaluating how authoritative or official a teaching is: (1) Is it repeatedly found in the scriptures? (2) Is it proclaimed by the united voice of the current Brethren? (3) Is it consistently taught by current general authorities and general officers acting in their official capacity? and (4) Is it found in recent Church publications or statements? The model differs from the approach the current General Authorities are using by referring to each level of teachings as "doctrine" (core doctrine, supporting doctrine, policy doctrine, and esoteric doctrine). In some ways, this might be seen as more of a semantic than substantive difference since they also emphasize that, unlike "core, eternal doctrine," policies can and do change and esoteric doctrines are not considered authoritative in the church today.

Though each of these models have some aspects in common with the others, such as an emphasis on source or canonicity, they differ in detail. Each recognizes that in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints doctrine is officially determined by those who have been called and who have formal authority to declare doctrine, namely the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Therefore, none of the models are presented as an official means of declaring "doctrine" itself. As would be expected, the different models produce somewhat different answers to the question, What is our doctrine?

Defining Doctrine—
Utilitarianism and Revelation

Two final means of determining doctrine that are continually emphasized by leaders and members alike are the witness of the Holy Spirit and the utilitarian concept of knowing by doing. The top three collocates (words juxtaposed or used side by side) with the word "doctrine" in the last three decades of general conference were "covenants," "section," and "book."

These clearly are tied to the book of scripture the Doctrine and Covenants. The next two most common collocates of doctrine were "taught" or "teach." This makes sense because doctrine is an authoritative teaching. But the next most frequent collocate over the entire corpus of general conference addresses was the word "whether." This seemed strange until it became clear where it was coming from. In John 7:17, Jesus Christ gives a key for determining doctrine. "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself." Other than references to the Doctrine and Covenants and the counsel to teach doctrine, the ability to determine the veracity of doctrine by *trying it* was the most frequently referred-to collocate of the word "doctrine" used by General Authorities in general conference.

Finally, perhaps no counsel on how to recognize truth would be more familiar to a Church member than the instruction to pray and receive a spiritual witness.[66] In the Church, it is considered not only the right but the responsibility of members to determine truth for themselves, and the promise is made that God will provide a revelatory answer to all who seek to know. Both ancient and modern scriptures are replete with similar admonitions and promises.[67] Likely the most common advice a member might receive when evaluating teachings is to pray and seek an answer from God. Such an individualized and spiritual approach to truth seeking would not carry much weight in a secular society nor be binding on the Church as a whole. Yet simply asking God without purposeful investigation is even contrary to common understanding in light of the Lord's instruction in Doctrine and Covenants 9:7–9. Members are expected to study as well as pray in order to know truth.

The founding prophet of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Joseph Smith, was an adamant preacher of what he believed were true principles, and he spent his life teaching those truths. And yet he was just as adamant that it was the responsibility and right of each individual to determine what they themselves would believe. He once stated, "When I have used every means in my power to exalt a mans [*sic*] mind, and have taught him righteous principles to no effect [and]

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66. Besides the purpose of confirming truth, Henry B. Eyring stated that "doctrine gains its power [in the life of the member] as the Holy Ghost confirms that it is true." Eyring, "The Power of Teaching Doctrine," 74.

67. See Nehemiah 9:30; John 5:32; 1 Corinthians 2:11; 2 Nephi 31:18; Alma 5:46; Moroni 10:3–5; Doctrine and Covenants 9:7–9.

he is still inclined in his darkness, yet the same principles of liberty and charity would ever be manifested by me as though he embraced it."[68] He further stated, "I never feel to force my doctrines upon any person [and] I rejoice to see prejudice give way to truth, and the traditions of men dispersed by the pure principles of the Gospel of Jesus Christ."[69] In this spirit, each member has the right and responsibility to "seek learning, even by study and also by faith" (D&C 88:118).

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68. See "Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846; Volume 1, 10 March 1844–1 March 1845," 120 (April 11, 1844), Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 5, 2021, http://www.josephsmithpapers.com/paper-summary/council-of-fifty-minutes-march-1844-january-1846-volume-1-10-march-1844-1-march-1845/122.

69. "History, 1838–1856, Volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844]," 1888 (February 12, 1844), Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 5, 2021, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/260.