Evaluating LDS Doctrine
Why this matters...

• “If God is unchanging and truth is eternal, then why have some of the teachings of the Church changed over time?”
• “Why don’t we still teach some of the doctrines that were taught in the early Church? Were they wrong, or are we?”
• “I once heard that [fill in GA name here] said that [fill in teaching here] so is that doctrine?”
• How can I differentiate between an “opinion” and an “official” doctrine of the Church?
Is this *official* LDS Doctrine? Why or why not?

• Jesus’s infinite Atonement saves and redeems people on *all* the worlds the Lord has created
Is this *official* LDS Doctrine? Why or why not?

• Taking the sacrament with the right hand
Is this *official* LDS Doctrine? Why or why not?

- We can progress from Kingdom to Kingdom in the next life (telestial to terrestrial to celestial)
Is this *official* LDS Doctrine? Why or why not?

- Women should not have multiple ear piercings (i.e. should only wear one pair of earrings).
Defining the word “Doctrine”

• In its most basic definition, dictionaries state that doctrine simply means “something that is taught” or “teaching, instruction” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 11th ed., s.v. “doctrine.”).

• The Prophet and his associates, when printing the Lectures on Faith from the School of the Prophets, classified them as “Theology,” and subtitled them “On the Doctrine of the Church of the Latter Day Saints.”
Defining the word “Doctrine”

• After the Sermon on the Mount, “the people were astonished at [The Savior’s] doctrine: For he taught them as one having authority” (Matthew 7:28–29; see also Matthew 22:33).

Defining the word “Doctrine”

• The word *doctrine* in this verse derives from the Greek *didachē*, meaning “teaching” or “the act of teaching” (*Strong’s Concordance* G1321).

• In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught eternal, timeless truths of the plan of salvation such as the command to be perfect like God our Father, but he also taught timely cultural applications specific mainly to his hearers, such as not appearing sad-faced while fasting and how to respond to lawsuits.

• Historically the word “doctrine” is broad and covers an array of different types of authoritative teachings.
Defining the word “Doctrine”

• The Church suggests there are different types of doctrine. The 2007 “Approaching Mormon Doctrine” LDS Newsroom statement says: “Some doctrines are more important than others and might be considered core doctrines. For example, the precise location of the Garden of Eden is far less important than doctrine about Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice” (http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/approaching-mormon-doctrine).

• The modern prophets often use adjectives before the word doctrine like “core doctrines” or “essential doctrines” or “fundamental doctrines,” implying there are non-core doctrines of a different nature. (See President Dieter F. Uchtdorf “Christlike Attributes,” CR, October 2005, p. 100 or Elder D. Todd Christofferson, “The Doctrine of Christ,” CR April, 2012, p. 86).
“Types”

Core Doctrine
(unchanging truths of salvation)
“Types”

- Supportive Doctrine
  (elaborative, descriptive, timely teachings expanding on core doctrine)

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Policy Doctrine
(timely statements related to applications of supportive or core doctrine)
“Types”

Core Doctrine
(unchanging truths of salvation)

Supportive Doctrine
(elaborative, descriptive, timely teachings expanding on core doctrine)

Policy Doctrine
(timely statements related to applications of supportive or core doctrine)

Esoteric Doctrine
(unknown or only partially revealed or yet to be revealed truths)
Core Doctrine

• In the words of Elder David A. Bednar, these are “gospel doctrines [that] are eternal, do not change, and pertain to the eternal progression and exaltation of Heavenly Father’s sons and daughters” (David A. Bednar, *Increase in Learning* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book 2011), 151).

• Such plan-of-salvation truths are what Elder Boyd K. Packer referred to when he said there are “doctrines” which “will remain fixed, eternal” (Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, October 1989, 18–19).

• Such eternal truths that do not change may include the nature of God, the eternal make-up of the spirit, the universal resurrection, and the work and the glory of God to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of his children (see Moses 1:39).
Core Doctrine

• The Church’s founding “Articles and Covenants” found in D&C 20 contain a succinct declaration of core, timeless doctrines:
  • “There is a God in heaven, who is infinite and eternal” (v. 17)
  • God “created man, male and female, after his own image” (v. 18)
  • God “gave unto them commandments” (v. 19)
  • “But, by transgression of these holy laws man...became fallen” (v. 20)
  • “Wherefore, the Almighty God gave his Only Begotten Son” (v. 21)
  • Through the 1st principles and ordinances mankind “should be saved” (v. 25)
  • Those that “worship the Father in his name, and endure in faith on his name to the end” (v. 29) will receive both “justification” (v. 30) and “sanctification through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (v. 31)
Supportive Doctrine

• These are elaborative, descriptive, timely teachings that expand on core doctrine.

• Christ’s Atonement is core and essential, but teachings that discuss how he suffered and what he suffered serve to expand upon the core concept of Atonement and redemption.

• Supporting doctrines can be eternal truths, but knowledge of them, unlike core doctrines, are not necessarily essential for salvation.
Supportive Doctrine

• An example of an eternal doctrine is that Jesus Christ will return to earth and reign as its rightful king and lawgiver.
Supportive Doctrine

• Supporting doctrines that may relate to Christ returning to reign as King:
  • That a righteous city of New Jerusalem will be built and Christ’s people gathered to prepare for his return.
  • There will be a great gathering in Adam-ondi-Ahman to prepare for Christ’s millennial rule.
  • That when Jesus returns to the earth the Mount of Olives will split and the Jewish people will recognize the Lord as the Messiah (see D&C 45:51–53).
  • That Satan will be bound, and that there will be a thousand-year period of peace.
  • These teachings may not be essential for salvation, but they elaborate upon, expand our understanding about, increase our faith in, and provide potential “hows” to the core doctrine of Christ’s return to earth.
Policy Doctrine

• Policy doctrine refers to timely teachings centered on application of core and supportive doctrines.

• As Elder Boyd K. Packer said, these are “the organization, programs, and procedures [that] will be altered as directed by Him whose church this is” (CR, October 1989, 19).

• As President Dieter F. Uchtdorf 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” (CR, October 2005).
Policy Doctrine

• Church policy is always authoritative, but it inevitably changes as the Church forms new policies that adjust, expand, and react to the situations of the membership.

• Policy doctrines can include such teachings as:
  • ordaining worthy young men to the priesthood at age twelve
  • standards for dress and grooming
  • placing baptismal fonts under the ground
  • not drinking wine
  • changes in Church structure, such as the role of the Seventies or who attends Church council meetings.
Policy Doctrine

• The Word of Wisdom is a modern example of policy doctrine. Restrictions on tea and coffee and wine have not been in effect in all dispensations, yet because the Lord foresaw “evils and designs which do and will exist in the hearts of conspiring men in the last days” (D&C 89:4), he provided a new doctrine for the “benefit” (D&C 89:1) of the Saints. This doctrine, in particular, has taken many shifts in policy, and eventually by 1933 the Church handbook of instruction required members to strictly follow the Word of Wisdom to be able to enter into the temple.
Esoteric Doctrine

• The word *esoteric* implies teachings that are only understood by a small group of people. Its synonyms are words such as *obscure* and *ambiguous*.

• The Prophet Joseph Smith explained that “it is not always wise to relate all the truth. Even Jesus, the Son of God, had to refrain from doing so, and had to restrain His feelings many times for the safety of Himself and His followers, and had to conceal the righteous purposes of His heart in relation to many things pertaining to His Father’s kingdom” (As cited in Robert L. Millet, “What Is Our Doctrine,” *Religious Educator* 4, no. 3 (2003), 8).
Esoteric Doctrine

- In the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*: “There are many subjects about which the scriptures are not clear and about which the Church has made no official pronouncements. In such matters, one can find differences of opinion among Church members and leaders. Until the truth of these matters is made known by revelation, there is room for different levels of understanding and interpretation of unsettled issues” (M. Gerald Bradford and Larry E. Dahl, “Doctrine: Meaning, Source, and History of Doctrine.” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (Macmillan: New York, 1992), 1:395).

- The Prophet Joseph lamented, “I could explain a hundred fold more than I ever have, of the glories of the Kingdoms manifested to me in the vision, were I permitted, and were the people prepared to receive it” (History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843]).
Esoteric Doctrine

• The sealed portion of the Book of Mormon is an example of esoteric doctrine. Known, then sealed up, but promised to come forward one day (see Ether 4; 5).

• Generally, we discuss and search for esoteric doctrines in private rather than in public. These teachings are esoteric because we do not proclaim them publically nor officially, although they may be true and have been taught or known in the past or will yet be given in the future.
Baptism, An Example

- How baptisms for the dead are accepted in the spirit world
- Do baptisms for the dead in temples, gender specific
- Baptisms for the dead in our dispensation
- Baptism for salvation
Sources to Evaluate “Official” Doctrine

• Is that official doctrine?
• How can we know if the Church stands behind a particular type of teaching as one of its authorized doctrines?
• Four sources of official doctrine
  • Is it repeatedly found in the scriptures?
  • Is it proclaimed by the united voice of the current Brethren?
  • Is it consistently taught by current General Authorities and general officers acting in their official capacity?
  • Is it found in recent Church publications or statements?
The Harmonized Scriptural Canon


• “It makes no difference,” stated Elder Joseph Fielding Smith, “what is written or what anyone has said, if what has been said is in conflict with what the Lord has revealed, we can set it aside. My words, and the teachings of any other member of the Church, high or low, if they do not square with the revelations, we need not accept them. Let us have this matter clear. We have accepted the four standard works as the measuring yardsticks, or balances, by which we measure every man's doctrine” (*Doctrines of Salvation*, 3:203-4).
The Harmonized Scriptural Canon

• Elder B.H. Roberts of the Seventy taught: “The Church has confined the sources of doctrine by which it is willing to be bound before the world 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” (B. H. Roberts, sermon of 10 July 1921, delivered in Salt Lake Tabernacle, printed in Deseret News, 23 July 1921, p. 7; As cited in Stephen E. Robinson, Are Mormons Christians?, 15).
The Harmonized Scriptural Canon

• Not just in the scriptures, but repeatedly, consistently, harmoniously in the scriptures.

• Scriptural outliers “No man hath seen God at any time” (1 John 4:12)

• Compared with Ex. 24:9-10, 33:11; Gen. 32:30; Acts 7:55-56 etc.
The **Harmonized** Scriptural Canon

- Elder Russell M. Nelson, “In the Bible we read this important declaration: ‘In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established’ (2 Corinthians 13:1). This assures God’s children that divine doctrines are confirmed by more than one scriptural witness.... Scriptural witnesses authenticate each other” (“Scriptural Witnesses," *Ensign*, Nov. 2007).

- Elder Boyd K. Packer, “I desire to share a few thoughts about a basic doctrine of the Church. What I say is based on these convictions: First: instruction vital to our salvation is not hidden in an obscure verse or phrase in the scriptures. To the contrary, essential truths are repeated over and over again. Second: every verse, whether oft-quoted or obscure, must be measured against other verses. There are complementary and tempering teachings in the scriptures which bring a balanced knowledge of truth” (“The Pattern of Our Parentage,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1984, 66).
The United Voice of the Current 1st Presidency and 12 Apostles

• We do not believe in *sola scriptura* (by scripture alone), but in *sola prophēta* (by prophet alone).

• One of the roles of the prophet, as President Gordon B. Hinckley said when he was President of the Church, is to “declare doctrine” (“What Are People Asking about Us?,” *Ensign*, November 1998, 70).

• Those who also hold all the keys of the kingdom, namely the First Presidency (D&C 81:2), “receive the oracles for the whole church” (D&C 124:126).
The **United Voice** of the Current 1st Presidency and 12 Apostles

- LDS Newsroom: “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” (“Approaching Mormon Doctrine,” LDS Newsroom, 4 May 2007).
The **United Voice** of the Current 1st Presidency and 12 Apostles

- D&C 107:27 “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, in order to make their decisions of the same power or validity one with the other.”

- *Church Magazines*: “When revelation is doctrine for the whole Church, it comes to only the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles . . . The prophet and President of the Church can receive revelation individually that becomes doctrine when it is sustained by the united voice of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles” (LaRene Porter Gaunt, “How Is Doctrine Established?” *Ensign*, Sept. 2013, 39).

- Elder M. Russell Ballard, “When the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve speak with a united voice, it is the voice of the Lord for that time” (“Stay in the Boat and Hold On!,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2014).
The **United Voice** of the Current 1st Presidency and 12 Apostles

- Examples of doctrine proclaimed by the united voice of the current First Presidency and Twelve Apostles can include
  - Letters from the First Presidency
  - Official declarations, proclamations, or pronouncements
  - Official handbooks of instruction
  - Web content on lds.org/newsroom that is unanimously approved by the 1st Presidency/12
  - Books, manuals, publications, or documents released under the approval or sanction of the united voice of the current prophets, such as *Preach My Gospel*
The Cumulative Official Teachings of General Authority/Officers of the Church

- Elder Neal L. Andersen: “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. Our doctrine is not difficult to find” (“Trial of Your Faith,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2012).

- Elder David A. Bednar, “Attempting to understand a doctrine or principle by relying unduly upon a single scripture or prophetic statement in isolation from all else that has been revealed on the subject generally is misguided. True doctrines and principles are emphasized repeatedly in the standard works, by the prophets and apostles, and through the illuminating and confirming power of the Holy Ghost” (*Act in Doctrine*, (2012) p.xvii).

- Examples are General Conference addresses, worldwide leadership broadcasts, regional conferences/talks, seminars/trainings for ecclesiastical leaders.
Singular Statements by Singular Leaders

• LDS Newsroom: “Not every statement made by a Church leader, past or present, necessarily constitutes doctrine. A single statement made by a single leader on a single occasion often represents a personal, though well-considered, opinion, but is not meant to be officially binding for the whole Church.” (“Approaching Mormon Doctrine,” 4 May 2007; See this statement repeated in Elder D. Todd Christofferson, “The Doctrine of Christ,” Ensign, May 2007).
Current **Publications** of the Church

- “Approaching Mormon Doctrine” by the LDS Newsroom wrote: “[Church doctrine] is consistently proclaimed in official Church publications”

- These include current Church magazines, seminary/institute manuals, priesthood/relief society manuals, © Intellectual Reserve/Corporation of the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, etc.
Current Publications of the Church

• Responding to the question of “Should that which is written in Church publications and lesson manuals be taken as official doctrine?” Elder Dean L. Larsen of the First Quorum of the Seventy and Managing Director of Curriculum Resources wrote: “All of the [Church publications] . . . are reviewed and cleared by the Church Correlation Review committees before they are published and issued to the Church. . . . Official publications of the Church carry messages that are sound in doctrine and fully in harmony with currently approved policies and procedures” (“I Have a Question,” Ensign, Aug. 1977).
Sources

- **Church Publications**: (teachings found in current books, manuals, magazines, websites published by the Church)
- **Repeated Teachings of GA’s**: (what is taught collectively and consistently by current general authorities)
- **United Voice of the 1st Presidency/12**: (united statements under the signature/approval of the 1st Pres./12)
- **Harmonized Scriptures**: (teachings that are found consistently in the canonized
Your Turn!

Let’s use these two models to evaluate three family-centered LDS teachings:

1. Family Home Evening
2. Jesus’s marriage status
3. Heavenly Mother
Family Home Evening

• Type: Is family home evening a core, supportive, policy, or esoteric teaching?

• Source: Is it taught consistently in the standard works, united voice of the prophets, repeated teachings of GA’s, or in Church manuals?

• Although the family home evening program may not be specifically taught in the scriptures, the concept of righteous parents gathering their children to teach gospel truths is found consistently in the standard works (see 1 Nephi 1:1; Enos 1:1; Mosiah 1:2, Mosiah 4:15; D&C 68:25–30; D&C 93:40–48). Specifically, the directive to hold family home evening on Monday is found in the current official Handbook of Instructions 2 in section 1.4.2. The counsel to hold family home evenings has also been declared repeatedly in recent general conference addresses and is found published in multiple official current Church publications, such as the Family Home Evening Resource Book, the Family Guidebook, or the family home evening page on lds.org.

• In summary, family home evening could be categorized as an official policy doctrine of the Church.
Jesus’s Marriage Status

• Type: Is Jesus’s marriage status a core, supportive, policy, or esoteric teaching?

• Source: Is it taught consistently in the standard works, united voice of the prophets, repeated teachings of GA’s, or in Church manuals?

• Jesus being married could be argued as a doctrine of the Church in the mid- to latter-nineteenth century based on the cumulative teachings of Church General Authorities. However, there is no known revelation on the subject, nor united statement from the First Presidency and the Twelve, and the cumulative standard works seem to evade the issue. Like other early doctrines, Jesus’s marriage status faded from public teaching over the decades and moved into the realm of the unknown or undeclared. In 2006, due primarily to the popularity of the novel The DaVinci Code, which posited that Jesus was married and had children, the Church officially released a statement through its spokesperson, saying, “The belief that Christ was married has never been official church doctrine. It is neither sanctioned nor taught by the church” (“LDS do not endorse claims in ‘Da Vinci,’” Deseret News, 17 May 2006). It is absent in any current Church manual.

• In summary it could be seen as a non-authorized, unofficial esoteric teaching.
Heavenly Mother

• Type: Is the doctrine of a Heavenly Mother a core, supportive, policy, or esoteric teaching?

• Source: Is it taught consistently in the standard works, united voice of the prophets, repeated teachings of GA’s, or in Church manuals?

• There are no direct references to Heavenly Mother in scripture—only inferences (such as Genesis 1:26-27). Recently the Church released an official essay on “Mother in Heaven” saying, “The doctrine of a Heavenly Mother is a cherished and distinctive belief.” The 1995 united statement of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” declares, “Each [person] is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny.” Specifically the First Presidency in 1909 unitedly declared, “all men and women are in the similitude of the universal Father and Mother, and are literally the sons and daughters of Deity.” There are over 100 references to “Heavenly Mother” or “Mother in Heaven” or “Heavenly Parents” in general conference settings, and lately they are increasing in frequency.

• In summary, doctrine that we have a Heavenly Mother could be considered a core/supportive, official doctrine. However, who she is, how she came to be, what roles she fulfills, seem to be esoteric, non-official teachings.
Conclusion

• Although we have proposed delineations of Latter-day Saint doctrine, our models proposed herein—like the nature of doctrine itself—are meant to be flexible and aid in coming to a clearer understanding of truth. We hope these can act as a starting point for discussion on various doctrinal subjects, whether the subject is fairly benign like Jesus’s birth date and whether priesthood holders should wear white shirts when officiating in ordinances, or more sensitive and controversial teachings past and present, such as priesthood restrictions, plural marriage, or same-gender marriage.

• The ninth article of faith declares, “We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.”
Conclusion

• When doctrine becomes too fixed, it loses its inert potential for revelation. The Prophet Joseph Smith opposed the idea of too strict a definition of the tenants of the Latter-day Saint faith, even after he published his own “Articles of Faith” in a letter to John Wentworth in March of 1842. As Joseph told a Mr. Butterfield who interviewed him in 1843, “The most prominent point of difference in sentiment between the Latter Day Saints [sic] and Sectarians was, that the latter were all circumscribed by some peculiar creed, which deprived its members the privilege of believing any thing not contained therein: Whereas the Latter Day Saints [sic] have no creed, but are ready to believe all true principles that exist, as they are made manifest from time to time.” (History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843], 1433, Joseph Smith Papers).
Conclusion

• To be too rigid in defining doctrine goes against the very concept Joseph Smith articulated about creeds: it closes us to new and expansive ways of seeing, understanding, believing, and teaching. Latter-day Saint doctrine is that which we teach—eternal, supportive, policy, esoteric, among others—guided and revealed and officially proclaimed by authorized, key-holding prophets, seers, and revelators. That which tries to confine the Lord and his servants from receiving and teaching anything that is not eternally expansive in nature simply is not Latter-day Saint doctrine.