

Joseph Fielding McConkie

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# Doctrinal Contributions of Joseph F. Smith

**I**t is of doctrine and of a great doctrinal teacher that I speak. President Joseph F. Smith brought much by way of understanding to the revelations given to the Latter-day Saint people and then added to them one of the greatest revelations about Christ and his redemptive ministry ever entrusted to those of the household of faith.

Dubbed the “fighting apostle,”<sup>1</sup> he knew no neutrality where the principles of the gospel were concerned. He had no fear of offending the devil or of disturbing the comfortable. The real Joseph F. Smith cannot be found within the perimeters of a gospel designed to appease those of shallow faith or excuse the need for faith and courage.

He did not suppose that the God of truth could be served in ignorance of the truth. If we learn nothing else from Joseph F. Smith’s life’s ministry, let us learn that true faith can only be seeded in true doctrine and that the purer the doctrine, the purer the fruits that it will bear.

He served as a special witness of Christ for over half a century. In doing so, he personified the verity that we know Christ and his Father only to the extent

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that we are like them (see John 17:3; 2 Peter 1:1–11). He was the living fulfillment of the promise of the Savior that if a man or woman would do his will, they “would know of the doctrine” (John 7:17).

Describing Joseph F. Smith, Charles Nibley—the Presiding Bishop under President Smith—said that the principles of the gospel “were so thoroughly imbued and indoctrinated in him that they were a part of his very being.”<sup>2</sup> Elder Stephen L. Richards, of the Quorum of the Twelve, said, “He so embodied in his life the great principles which I hold dear that he gave them a significance and a meaning and a tangibility that they could have had in no other way.”<sup>3</sup>

Elder John A. Widtsoe, who had a profound regard for President Smith and who compiled extracts from his sermons in the book *Gospel Doctrine*,<sup>4</sup> said, “President Smith’s sermons and writings breathe the true spirit of the Gospel, are sound as gold in tenet and precept, and express the will of the Master in every word.”<sup>5</sup>

One measure of how well you stand for the truth is in who opposes you. As my father so often told his children, “It is as important to have the right enemies as it is to have the right friends.” During the course of one week in June 1907, the *Salt Lake Tribune* described President Joseph F. Smith with the following epithets: greedy, lawbreaker, lecher, immoral, ruthless, sordid, viperous, insane, wicked, withered limb, apostate, outcast, traitor, anarchist, rebel, and atheist.<sup>6</sup>

In 1911, when national magazines waged an anti-Mormon crusade, *Cosmopolitan* raked over the old anti-Mormon charge of blood atonement, declaring that, given the power, Mormonism would “re-repeat the Mountain Meadows Massacre in every corner of the land.” It described Joseph F. Smith as “furtive,” “lurking,” and “sly,” likening him to a cat that would attack only when one’s back was turned.<sup>7</sup>

*McClure’s* added that he was “a man of violent passions; one could easily imagine him torturing heretics or burning witches to advance the kingdom of God.”<sup>8</sup> *Everybody’s* described him as “a religious fanatic of small and bitter mind” who was, they declared, “the ultimate insane fanatic.”<sup>9</sup>

This paper highlights several key moments that illustrate how Joseph F. Smith, while presiding over the Church (1901–18), faced and handled challenges to the doctrines of the Restoration with authoritative statements that illuminated the views of the Church on vital doctrines.

## **Are Mormons Christians? (1907)**

During the period that President Joseph F. Smith presided over the Church, the fire of hatred toward the Church was fanned to fever pitch. In an “Address to the World,”<sup>10</sup> read at the 1907 general conference of the Church, President Smith declared, “Never were our principles or our purposes more widely misrepresented, more seriously misunderstood. Our doctrines are distorted, the sacred ordinances of our religion ridiculed, our Christianity questioned, our history falsified, our character traduced, and our course of conduct as a people reprobated and condemned.”<sup>11</sup>

From the beginning of time, Satan and his minions have hated God and his people. We cannot suppose that this will ever change. Nor would we expect arguments against the Church to change, because the truths of salvation do not change.

Some have suggested that hatred of our pioneer forefathers represented a national disdain for polygamy, but it should be remembered that as a people we had been driven from New York to Ohio and from Ohio to Missouri and from Missouri to Illinois and from Illinois outside the boundaries of the United States before polygamy became public.

The real culprit is revelation—revelation given to us as Latter-day Saints—and as long as we believe in a God who is speaking in current times and as long as we are willing to listen to what he has to say, we will be hated by the world. Consider these extracts from this official declaration:

The religion of this people is pure Christianity. Its creed is expressive of the practical life. Its theology is based on the doctrines of the Redeemer.

If it be true Christianity to accept Jesus Christ in person and his mission as divine; to revere him as the Son of God, the crucified and risen Lord, through whom alone mankind can attain salvation; to accept his teachings as a guide, to adopt as a standard and observe as a law the ethical code he promulgated; to comply with the requirements proscribed by him as essential to membership in his Church, namely, faith, repentance, baptism by immersion for the remission of sins, and the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, if this be Christianity, then we are Christians, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a Christian church.<sup>12</sup>

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A number of articles of faith were announced stating what the Latter-day Saints believed in and what they did not believe in. They included the following:

We hold that man is verily the child of God, formed in his image, endowed with divine attributes, and possessing power to rise from the gross desires of earth to the ennobling aspirations of heaven.<sup>13</sup>

We deny the existence of arbitrary power in the Church; and this because its government is moral government purely, and its forces are applied through kindness, reason, and persuasion. Government by consent of the governed is the rule of the Church.<sup>14</sup>

In answer to the charge of disloyalty, founded upon alleged secret obligations against our government, we declare to all men that there is nothing treasonable or disloyal in any ordinance, ceremony, or ritual of the Church.<sup>15</sup>

We do not believe it just to mingle religious influence with civil government, whereby one religious society is fostered and another proscribed in its spiritual privileges, and the individual rights of its members, as citizens, denied.<sup>16</sup>

The declaration reaffirmed our belief in the principle of revelation and affirmed that God continues to reveal himself to mortals, as in ancient times; it rejected all arguments that such a belief precludes our being loyal citizens to this country or to any earthly government.

We refuse to be bound by interpretations which others place upon our beliefs; or by what they allege must be the practical consequences of our doctrine.

We deny that either our belief in divine revelation, or our anticipation of the coming kingdom of God, weakens in any degree the genuineness of our allegiance to our country.<sup>17</sup>

The congregation voted to accept this declaration as binding on them as scripture.<sup>18</sup> The relevance of this declaration, made over one hundred years ago, to our current circumstances is quite striking. Indeed, many members of the Church might feel the same sentiments expressed in the declaration are just as relevant today as they were when President Smith first read them.

## **Higher Criticism and Darwinism**

The new century brought with it new challenges to the faith, not just of Latter-day Saints but of all Bible believers. Marching under the banner of science, biblical higher criticism and Darwinism joined together in an assault on biblical literalism and the reality of revelation.

Higher criticism is the study of authorship, dates of writing, and meaning of the books of the Bible, using the techniques or findings of archaeology, literary criticism, and comparative religion.<sup>19</sup> When this approach is not balanced with faith, it becomes the study of revelation by those who deny the principle of revelation.

While the theory of evolution, or Darwinism, has itself evolved over the years, it then asserted and still maintains today (1) that the various forms of life on earth (including humans) share a common pedigree or ancestry, (2) that biological variations arise and are passed down to subsequent generations by hereditary transmission, and (3) that the mechanism driving the differentiation of the various kinds of life is natural selection.

As with the higher critics, Darwinism, in its purest secular form, eschews the idea of revelation and of a god in whose image and likeness we were created. It announces no purpose in the existence of man, no hope of eternal life, and certainly does not embrace the idea that humanity may become as God is. It was concepts such as these that prompted President Smith to prophetically clarify some of the truths that Darwinism brought into question.

### **Human Origins (1909)**

In 1909, while some in the world celebrated the hundredth birthday of Charles Darwin and honored his contributions to the world of science, the Church issued an official declaration known as “The Origin of Man.”<sup>20</sup> Elder Orson F. Whitney was the wordsmith,<sup>21</sup> but the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve sat in council frequently to assure that it properly reflected their faith and those truths that had been revealed on the matter.

James E. Talmage, noted scientist and former president of the University of Utah, who would be called to the apostleship two years later; John A. Widtsoe, also a noted scientist and president of Utah State, who would be called to the apostleship twelve years later; and George H. Brimhall, the president of Brigham

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Young University, were invited into some of those councils to make whatever suggestions they had.<sup>22</sup>

The document reads in part as follows:

“God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them” (Genesis 1:27). In these plain and pointed words the inspired author of the Book of Genesis made known to the world the truth concerning the origin of the human family. Moses, the prophet-historian—“learned,” as we are told, “in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22)—when making this important announcement was not voicing a mere opinion, a theory derived from his researches into the occult lore of that ancient people. He was speaking as the mouthpiece of God, and his solemn declaration was for all time and for all people.

Moses taught that man had both a spirit and a temporal creation. If therefore we can ascertain the form of the Father of our spirits we will be able to discover the form of the original man.

Adam, our first progenitor, “the first man” (Moses 1:34), was, like Christ, a preexistent spirit, and like Christ he took upon him an appropriate body, the body of a man, and so became a “living soul” (Genesis 2:7). . . . All men existed in the spirit before any man existed in the flesh and that all who have inhabited the earth since Adam have taken bodies and become souls in like manner.

It is held by some that Adam was not the first man upon this earth, and that the original human being was a development from lower orders of the animal creation. These, however, are the theories of men. The word of the Lord declared that Adam was “the first man of all men” (Moses 1:34), and we are therefore in duty bound to regard him as the primal parent of our race. . . .

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, basing its belief on divine revelation, ancient and modern, proclaims man to be the direct and lineal offspring of Deity. . . . [God] formed every plant that grows, and every animal that breathes, each after its own kind, spiritually and temporally—“that which is spiritual being in the likeness of that which is temporal, and that which is temporal in the likeness of that which is spiritual” (D&C 77:2). He made the tadpole and the ape, the lion and the elephant, but He did not make them in His own image, nor endow them with Godlike reason and

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intelligence. Nevertheless, the whole animal creation will be perfected and perpetuated in the Hereafter, each class in its “distinct order or sphere,” and will enjoy “eternal felicity.” That fact has been made plain in this dispensation (D&C 77:3).<sup>23</sup>

I have learned over the years that people see in this document what they are prepared to see, but I do not know how our language could allow for a more expressive and enlightening statement than the declaration that people are the “*direct and lineal offspring of Deity.*”

### **Brigham Young University (1911)**

Like the ash of a volcanic eruption, higher criticism and Darwinian evolution descended on the faculty and student body of Brigham Young University as its most learned and popular professors took up the cause of this new enlightenment.

Three members of the faculty either ignored or didn’t understand the 1909 statement of the First Presidency and became particularly zealous advocates of both higher criticism and Darwinism. The First Presidency became involved in the matter and assigned Horace Cummings, commissioner of Church Schools (1905–20), to learn more about the situation in Provo. According to Cummings’s report to the First Presidency, their classroom lectures included such expressions as the following:

The Bible is “a collection of myths, folk-lore, dramas, literary productions, history and some inspiration.”<sup>24</sup>

The story of Adam and Eve, the Flood, the confusion of tongues, the parting of the Red Sea, and the temptations of Christ were cited as classic examples of the mythical nature of the Bible and why it should not be taken literally.

While the Bible was not to be trusted as being literal, the theory of evolution was treated as a demonstrated law in their classes, giving those who stand in its light a new center of gravity by which they could then reinterpret all other gospel principles.

Thus it was reasoned that all truths change and evolve. Nothing is fixed or reliable. And since these newly found “truths” applied to the Bible, they must apply in like manner to the revelations of the Restoration. Visions and revelations were spoken of as mere mental suggestions. In their classrooms, the objective

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reality of the First Vision was open to question, as would be any account of angels restoring priesthood keys or authority.<sup>25</sup>

The zeal of these professors and their professed loyalty to so-called academic integrity caused the First Presidency to call for their resignation following which many in the student body protested using an avowed anti-Mormon newspaper to air their displeasure.<sup>26</sup>

### Discerning Truth

The evolution of the word *science* captures the story that was unfolding. In Webster's 1828 dictionary, *science* is defined as "the comprehension or understanding of truth."<sup>27</sup> With the passage of years, the nature of the word changed so that it now describes various branches of study; the focus has shifted to the process rather than the end result.

"All truth," declared Joseph F. Smith in the 1906 First Presidency Christmas Message, "from whatever source it seems to emanate, in science, in art, in philosophy, in theology, in discovery or invention, which promotes happiness and elevates mankind, is from the Father of light who sent his Son Jesus Christ of Nazareth, into the world to uplift his sons and daughters and bring them out of darkness, ignorance and sin into communion with him and obedience to his laws."<sup>28</sup>

A few years later President Smith taught, "We believe in righteousness. We believe in all truth, no matter to what subject it may refer. No sect or religious denomination in the world possesses a single principle of truth that we do not accept or that we will reject. We are willing to receive all truth, from whatever source it may come; for truth will stand, truth will endure."<sup>29</sup>

President Smith told college students that they could use the theories of men as a temporary scaffolding for research purposes. "It is," he said, "when these theories are settled upon as basic truths that trouble appears, and the searcher stands in grave danger of being led hopelessly from the right way. . . . The religion of the Latter-day Saints is not hostile to any truth, nor to scientific search for truth. 'That which is demonstrated, we accept with joy,' said the First Presidency in their Christmas greeting to the Saints, 'but vain philosophy, human theory and mere speculations of men, we do not accept, nor do we adopt anything contrary to divine revelation or to good, common sense.'"<sup>30</sup>

He noted that the professors who had been dismissed from Brigham Young University were of the settled opinion that when religion found itself at odds



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with science, it required modification on the part of religion, not science. “The Church, on the contrary,” President Smith said, “holds to the definite authority of divine revelation which must be the standard; and that, as so-called ‘science’ has changed from age to age in its deductions, and as divine revelation is truth, and must abide forever, views as to the lesser should conform to the positive statements of the greater; and, further, that in institutions founded by the Church for the teaching of theology, as well as other branches of education, its instructors must be in harmony in their teachings with its principles and doctrines.”<sup>31</sup>

The gospel of Jesus Christ embraces all truth and all light. Since all people have been born with the Light of Christ, we each can and should be a source of truth. Upon hearing or learning truth we embrace it as part of the everlasting gospel. Using the principles taught by President Smith as our guide, we can discern the light of heaven from its counterfeits with the following principles:

1. “That which doth not edify is not of God, and is darkness” (D&C 50:23)—the basic question being, does the idea or theory involved exalt or debase humankind?
2. Is the idea or theory being espoused in harmony with divine truths already revealed? (D&C 52:15–19). Truth cannot contradict itself, nor can it be in a constant state of flux. The God of heaven does not need to be redefined with each passing generation.
3. Common sense and reason form a part of the gospel; they are as the Aaronic Priesthood is to the Melchizedek Priesthood. If they have the light of heaven in them, they will always sustain and conform to the higher order of things.

Everything that embraces the Light of Christ—be it true science, true philosophy, or true religion—must comply with these principles.

### **Figurative or Literal**

The greater the spiritual truth, the greater the opposition will be to it. An effective way to oppose spiritual truths is to declare that which is literal to be figurative and that which is figurative to be literal. Thus one can profess belief in the words of scripture while taking all meaning from them. Nowhere is this more

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evident than in truths that deal with the nature of God and our relationship to him. God said people were created in his image and likeness (see Genesis 1:27). Latter-day Saints believe it. Satan and his minions say to so believe is blasphemy.

When I served as a mission president, a minister in the Church of Scotland asked me to come and talk to him. I accepted his invitation. He insisted that we limit our discussion to the Bible. I bore him a testimony of the Bible like he had never heard before in which I told him about all the Bible characters who appeared to the Prophet Joseph Smith. I told him that Adam was one of them.<sup>32</sup>

He told me that my testimony could not be true because Adam was simply a myth, a way for primitive man to give explanation to that which they could not otherwise understand.

I told him that if Adam was a myth, then the Fall was a myth, and if the Fall was a myth, the Atonement was a myth. This being the week before Easter, I asked what he would be preaching next Sunday.

He sat silent. I was simply repeating what I had been taught by my grandfather Joseph Fielding Smith, and I have always assumed that he was taught the same thing by his father.<sup>33</sup> It is what the Book of Mormon teaches, and they were students of the Book of Mormon (see Mormon 9:12).

My minister friend had spent twenty years teaching theology classes at a Scottish university and had lost himself in the kind of thing that comes from the higher critics. For these scholars, when a literal reading of scripture did not harmonize with science, it was designated as figurative.

### **Eternal Progression**

Among some of our faith, it is argued that the Fall was the result of natural law and thus that mastery of universal laws constituted the path to exaltation. Advocates of this notion then reached out and defined eternal progression as involving both men and God in the endless search for knowledge that they might live in harmony with law.<sup>34</sup>

This is a doctrine that never set well with the family from which I come. Joseph Smith did not like it; my second-great-grandfather Hyrum Smith did not like it; my grandfather Joseph Fielding Smith Jr. did not like it; and my father, Bruce R. McConkie, did not like it.<sup>35</sup> Modern revelation declares that “all kingdoms have a law given; and there are many kingdoms; for there is no space in the which there is no kingdom; and there is no kingdom in which there is no space,

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either a greater or a lesser kingdom. And unto every kingdom is given a law; and unto every law there are certain bounds also and conditions.” Continuing, the revelation states that God “comprehendeth all things, and all things are before him, and all things are round about him; and he is above all things, and in all things, and is through all things, and is round about all things; and all things are by him, and of him, even God, forever and ever” (D&C 88:36–42).

This revelation clearly states that God is the creator of all law, not its servant or its partner. Our God is not, as Joseph F. Smith put it, “a congeries of laws floating like a fog through the universe.”<sup>36</sup>

### **Divine Sonship of Christ (1915)**

The God of whom President Joseph F. Smith testified was a personal being, the actual and literal parent of our spirits. Developing this theme at a stake conference in the Box Elder Stake in Brigham City in January 1915, he said, “The Savior Jesus Christ, begotten of God, was in the likeness of his Father, resembling him so nearly that He said on one occasion that ‘He that hath seen me has seen the Father.’” Directing himself particularly to the Primary children, President Smith said:

I see a little boy. He has hair, he has eyes and he has a face which resembles his father’s, and when he grows up we say that we cannot tell him from his father, so perfect is resemblance between the boy and his father. . . . Jesus Christ was created just like his Father; had the same features; same frame, same kind of body and was so like Him when you saw him you saw an exact likeness or similitude of His Father.

You all know that your fathers are indeed your fathers and that your mothers are indeed your mothers—you all know that don’t you? You cannot deny it. Now, we are told in scriptures that Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God in the flesh. Well, now for the benefit of the older ones, how are children begotten? I answer just as Jesus Christ was begotten of his father. The Christian denominations believe that Christ was begotten not of God but of the spirit that overshadowed his mother. This is nonsense. . . .

Now, little boys and girls, when you are confronted by infidels in the world who know nothing of how Christ was begotten, you can say he was born just as

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the infidel was begotten and born, so was Christ begotten by his Father, who is also our Father—the Father of our spirits—and he was born of his mother Mary.

The difference between Jesus Christ and other men is this: Our fathers in the flesh are mortal men, who are subject unto death; but the Father of Jesus Christ in the flesh is the God of Heaven. Therefore Jesus, as he declared, received the power of life from his Father and was never subject unto death but had life in himself as his father had life in himself. Because of this power he overcame death and the grave and became master of the resurrection and the means of salvation to us all. . . .

Now, my little friends, I will repeat again in words as simple as I can, and you talk to your parents about it, that God, the Eternal Father is literally the father of Jesus Christ.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Father and the Son (1916)**

In the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the leaders and teachers of the Church used Jehovah, Elohim, Lord, God, and other titles interchangeably to describe the Father and the Son. Additionally, the accepted canon of the Latter-day Saints rarely differentiates the titles of the Father and the Son. In an effort to help members better understand the Godhead and their roles, and to avoid confusion with scriptural texts referring to Christ as our father, President Smith issued a document titled *Doctrinal Exposition on the Father and the Son* from the First Presidency in 1916.<sup>38</sup> In the exposition, four different senses in which the word *father* is used in reference to Deity are given:<sup>39</sup>

1. *“Father” as a literal parent.* God the Father is the literal father of our spirits and of the Lord Jesus Christ in the flesh.
2. *“Father” as creator.* Christ under the direction of the Father created the heavens and the earth and thus is referred to as “Father.”
3. *Jesus Christ the “father” of those who abide in his gospel.* Those who are born again are adopted as the sons and daughters of Christ.
4. *Jesus Christ the “father” by divine investiture of authority.* Christ, who perfectly represents the Father, speaks in the first person for him.<sup>40</sup>

## **Vision of the Redemption of the Dead (1918)**

At the October 1918 general conference, President Smith declared that he had received several divine communications during the previous months. One of these, concerning the Savior's visit to the spirits of the dead while his body was in the tomb, he had received the previous day.

At the conclusion of the conference, he dictated this revelation to his son Joseph Fielding Smith Jr., and it was then submitted to the counselors in the First Presidency, the Council of the Twelve, and the Patriarch, and unanimously accepted by them. President Smith passed away two weeks later.<sup>41</sup>

In 1978 the revelatory experience was added to the Pearl of Great Price along with Joseph Smith's vision of the celestial kingdom. Shortly thereafter these two revelations were taken out of the Pearl of Great Price and given their present places in Doctrine and Covenants 137 and 138.

On a personal note, as a young man I had the opportunity to attend some institute classes at the University of Utah taught by my father. In one of those classes, he presented the vision of the redemption of the dead and discoursed on it using as his text the book *Gospel Doctrine*, where the vision is recorded. In the course of that class, he told us that the day would come when this vision would be added to our canon of scripture. I understood that to be a prophetic statement.

It was about twelve years later that he as a member of the Scripture Committee made the recommendation that this revelation and Joseph Smith's vision of the celestial kingdom be added to our canon of scripture. When he made that recommendation he had already ordered these revelations in verse form.

I had an interesting visit with him about that. The revelation follows the pattern of such revelations as the one shown to Nephi by the angel of the Lord in 1 Nephi 11–14, which consists of a series of different visions with no particular concern for a chronological sequence.

We see the same thing in Joseph Smith's vision of the degrees of glory, which starts with the celestial kingdom and then moves to the fate of the sons of perdition, then to the terrestrial kingdom, the telestial kingdom, and back to the celestial kingdom.

Our discussion centered around the fact that people were combining the second part of the vision of the redemption of the dead, which refers to those living in our dispensation, and placing them in the spirit world at the time of

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Christ. Dad spoke of this as an unfortunate misunderstanding. I asked him if he had considered dividing the vision into two separate sections, which would help separate these events. He thought about that for a moment and said, “No, but I wish I had thought of it at the time.”

In the first part of this revelation, the Lord teaches those there assembled “the doctrine of the resurrection and the redemption of mankind from the fall, and from individual sins on conditions of repentance” (D&C 138:19). Next, mission calls are extended with further instruction as to the message they are to take to those they taught. The third and final part of the revelation deals with the place of temples in making the ordinances of salvation available to those who embrace the gospel in the spirit world.

While Joseph Smith’s revelation on the degrees of glory (D&C 76) is the greatest revelation ever given on the nature of the worlds to come, the vision of the redemption of the dead (D&C 138) is without peer in what it reveals about the world of disembodied spirits.

Describing the righteous in paradise we read the following:

I beheld that they were filled with joy and gladness, and were rejoicing together because *the day of their deliverance was at hand*.

They were assembled awaiting the advent of the Son of God into the spirit world, to declare their *redemption from the bands of death*.

Their sleeping dust was to be restored unto its perfect frame, bone to his bone, and the sinews and the flesh upon them, the spirit and the body to be united never again to be divided, that they might receive a fulness of joy.

While this vast multitude waited and conversed, *rejoicing in the hour of their deliverance from the chains of death*, the Son of God appeared, declaring *liberty to the captives who had been faithful*;

And there he preached to them the everlasting gospel, the doctrine of the resurrection and the redemption of mankind from the fall, and from individual sins on conditions of repentance.

But unto the wicked he did not go, and among the ungodly and the unrepentant who had defiled themselves while in the flesh, his voice was not raised;

Neither did the rebellious who rejected the testimonies and the warnings of the ancient prophets behold his presence, nor look upon his face.

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Where these were, darkness reigned, but among the righteous there was peace;

And the *saints* rejoiced in their redemption, and bowed the knee and acknowledged the Son of God as *their Redeemer and Deliverer from death and the chains of hell*. (D&C 138:15–23; emphasis added)

Again, it would be hard to imagine language that was more plain and expressive than that in this revelation, teaching us that everyone in the spirit world is in spirit prison. Many members of the Church are surprised to be told this.

Among the great truths we learn from this revelation are the following:

1. At death the just or the righteous go to paradise—as have the righteous before them—to await the day of their deliverance. Paradise is in spirit prison. There the righteous dead look upon the long absence of their spirits from their bodies as a bondage. To understand this is to have a greater appreciation for and understanding of the Atonement of Christ.
2. The Lord’s house is a house of order in which no one arrogates to themselves the right to minister the gospel. This must be done under the authority of the priesthood. All who properly represent the Lord must be called by the Lord to do so. This principle is as true in the spirit world as it is in mortality (see D&C 84:19). The righteous dead from the time of Adam to the time of the visitation of Christ could not teach the gospel to those in darkness until they were properly called and commissioned by Christ himself.
3. In like manner, “the faithful elders of this dispensation, when they part from mortal life, continue their labors in the preaching of the gospel of repentance and redemption, through the sacrifice of the Only Begotten Son of God, among those who are in darkness and under the bondage of sin” (D&C 138:57).

## **Conclusions**

By the latter decades of the first century AD, the meridian Church was losing its identity, eschewing the principles upon which it was founded and becoming acceptable to the world by embracing the beliefs and practices of the world.

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Mormonism, so-called, found itself in a position to do a similar thing as the world transitioned from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. During this period, a people maligned and persecuted on the one hand and deluged with the faithless learning of the wise on the other, found their identity, retrenched themselves in the doctrines of the Restoration, and continued to build the Church and kingdom of God under the inspired leadership of President Joseph F. Smith.

He was the last of our prophets to have personally known the Prophet Joseph Smith. He was blessed as an infant by Joseph Smith Sr.,<sup>42</sup> and as a boy in Nauvoo he had the spirit of that place and the events surrounding the death of his own father and the Prophet deeply riveted upon his soul.

In the teaching of the revelations of the Restoration, he was without peer. His was the courage born of truth and the unwavering and uncompromising testimony that comes from pure knowledge.

He defended the foundational doctrines of the Church—the Creation, Fall, and Atonement—as actual and literal at a time when they were being assailed by many of the so-called higher critics and theories of science. With eloquence and fervor he testified of God and his Son Jesus Christ and our place in the heavenly family.

At the same time he threw open the doors of the Church to truth from wherever it might come. “No sect or religious denomination in the world possesses a single principle of truth that we do not accept or that we will reject,” he declared.<sup>43</sup>

He was no less bold in defending the Church against its critics. To contend against Mormonism, he said, was to contend against the Bible; it was to contend against God, Christ, and all that was true. No one, he affirmed, “could prevail against ‘Mormonism’ on scriptural ground. . . . Why? Because we believe the scripture; we are established upon the scriptures of divine truth; we are built upon the foundation of apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone.”<sup>44</sup>

Of the Church’s critics he said:

They cannot uproot us nor overturn us by the scriptures; it can’t be done. . . . The moment that men attempt to fight this Church they fight God, they fight the principles of His gospel and His truth, they fight faith in God, faith in Jesus Christ, faith in righteousness, faith in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, faith in every principle that exalts and uplifts and ameliorates the condition



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of man in the world. If they undertake to fight us they fight these principles, because we have espoused these principles. They are our principles, and they are not principles of error, of injustice, or unvirtue, or ungodliness. We do not espouse any such doctrines.<sup>45</sup>

His was a sure voice in a time of tempest that steadied the good ship *Zion* through the storms of the day, teaching with eloquence and power those principles upon which the fulfillment of our destiny must rest.

### Notes

1. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1938), 440.
2. Charles Nibley, in Conference Report, April 1919, 63.
3. Stephen L. Richards, in Conference Report, April 1919, 54.
4. Alan K. Parrish, "Joseph F. Smith and John A. Widtsoe: Reaching the Young Men Through the *Improvement Era*," in *Times of Transition*, ed. Thomas G. Alexander (Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saints History, Brigham Young University, 2003), 33–42.
5. *Gospel Doctrine: Sermons and Writings of President Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1919), vi.
6. *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 5–11, 1907.
7. *Cosmopolitan*, March 1911, 444–46; 696–97.
8. *McClure's*, January 1911, 259.
9. *Everybody's*, July 1911, 209–22.
10. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, April 4, 1907, 9; See also Journal History, April 5, 1907. The following is recorded in the Journal History at a council meeting of the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve and a few Presidents of the Seventy held on January 3, 1907, in Salt Lake City, Utah.

"President [Joseph F.] Smith called attention of the Council to the palpable falsehoods and misrepresentations against the Church contained in the printed speeches of Senators [Julius C.] Burrows and [Fred T.] DuBois, made on the floor of the Senate of the United States, and he felt it was due to the Church that a complete answer in refutation thereto be prepared and published.

This was fully concurred in by the Council, and a committee was appointed to prepare the answer, composed of Bro[ther]s. [Orson F.] Whitney, [David O.] McKay, [B. H.] Roberts, [James E.] Talmage, Nephi [L.] Morris, Joseph F[ielding] Smith Jr., F[ranklin] S. Richards, LeGrand Young and Richard W. Young." Richard E. Turley Jr., ed., *Selected Collections from the Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), vol. 2, DVD 27.
11. Apparently because of its length this document was not included in the Conference Report. To read the document in full, see James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency*, 6 vols (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1970), 4:143–55 or Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 382–94.
12. Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 382–83.

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13. Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 382–83.
14. Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 387.
15. Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 391.
16. Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 393.
17. Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 393.
18. In Conference Report, April 1907, 9.
19. “One of the most far-reaching activities of the modern mind,” said Will Durrant, “has been the ‘Higher Criticism’ of the Bible—the mounting attack upon its authenticity and veracity, countered by the heroic attempt to save the historical foundations of Christian faith; the results may in time prove as revolutionary as Christianity itself.” *Caesar and Christ* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), 553.
20. First Presidency, “Editor’s Table: The Origin of Man,” *Improvement Era*, November 1909, 75–81.
21. On September 24, 1909, George F. Gibbs wrote to James E. Talmage as follows: “The presidency invite you to meet them at their office at 10 o’clock on Monday morning, 27th inst. They desire you to sit with them and the apostles listening to an article by Elder Orson F. Whitney on the origin of man, considered from a Church standpoint.” *Minutes of the Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1900–1909* (Salt Lake City: n.p., 2010), 552.
22. The information on each of these three men comes from their personal journals.
23. First Presidency, “Editor’s Table: The Origin of Man,” 75–81.
24. Horace H. Cummings, report of investigations of the theological teaching at Brigham Young University, 21 January 1911, 7.
25. Ernest L. Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years*, 4 vols. (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 1:420, 423.
26. Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 172.
27. Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), s.v. “science.”
28. First Presidency, “Editor’s Table: First Presidency Christmas Message,” *Improvement Era*, January 1906, 248.
29. In Conference Report, April 1909, 7.
30. Joseph F. Smith, “Editor’s Table: Theory and Divine Revelation,” *Improvement Era*, April 1911, 548, 550; Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 39.
31. Smith, “Editor’s Table: Theory and Divine Revelation,” 548–51.
32. On this matter we have the testimony of President John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 18:326; Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 9:41; and Zebedee Coltrin, in *The Teachings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Larry E. Dahl and Donald Q. Cannon (Salt Lake City, Bookcraft, 1997), 18.
33. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp., Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954–56), 1:120.
34. Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 279.
35. For Joseph Smith see the *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 4:11; for Joseph Fielding Smith and Hyrum Smith, see *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:5–10; for Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 238–39.
36. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, April 1907, 39.
37. James R. Clark, “Box Elder Talk,” in *Messages of the First Presidency*, 4:328–32.

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38. Both President Smith and his counselor Charles W. Penrose addressed the matter in the April conference of the same year.
39. *Messages of the First Presidency*, 5:26–34.
40. This document can be found in full in James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith*, 465–73.
41. We would assume that President Smith’s tenure as the President of the Salt Lake Temple from 1898 to 1911 played an important part in preparing him to receive this vision. Also the premature deaths of many of his children, including Hyrum Mack, who was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, and his wife who died the previous month (September 1918), combined to make President Smith keenly interested in the nature of the spirit world.
42. Joseph F. Smith received a name and father’s blessing under the hands of his grandfather Joseph Smith Sr. He was named after the Prophet and after Mary Fielding’s brother Joseph Fielding. See *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, p. 446. See also *Pioneer Women of Faith & Fortitude*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: International Society, Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1998), 1:96.

“Phoebe Morton Angell was spoken of as ‘Mother Angell’ because of her service as a midwife and nurse among early pioneers. She attended Mary Fielding Smith when Joseph F. Smith was born, Nov 13, 1838. This was in Far West, Missouri while his father Hyrum Smith, was in jail because of his religious convictions. Hyrum’s father had sent word to his son that he was the father of a baby boy and asked Hyrum what the child’s name should be. Hyrum sent back that when the baby was eight days of age, his grandfather was to bless him and give him the name of Joseph Fielding Smith. This was done and it was Mother Angell who dressed the baby for the occasion and placed him in his grandfather’s arms to receive his blessing. She tended the mother until she was well.” *Heart Throbs of the West*, 12 vols. (Salt Lake City: International Society, Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1939–51), 3:123.
43. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, April 1907, 7.
44. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, October 1910, 128.
45. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, October 1910, 128–29.