

ROBERT J. WOODFORD

1832

*Joseph Smith
and "The Vision"*

*T*he first significant event recorded in the historical accounts of Joseph Smith's life during 1832 is a conference he attended at Amherst, Ohio, on January 25. Two important developments occurred at that conference. The previous November, Joseph had received a revelation, now part of section 107 of the Doctrine and Covenants, wherein the Lord told him there should be a president for the high priesthood (see vv. 64–66). At the conference, Joseph was sustained by common consent of the members and was then ordained president of the high priesthood by Sidney Rigdon. The other important development was the reception of section 75 of the Doctrine and Covenants, which called numerous men

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to serve missions, principally in the eastern part of the United States. These men, who were mostly farmers, served with great sacrifice. They left just before the planting season and were gone during the entire growing season. When they returned in September, Joseph Smith received section 84, an important revelation about the priesthood and missionary work.

The most notable event during February occurred on the sixteenth. Joseph Smith received section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants, which is discussed following this review.

In March, several important events took place. Joseph received section 78 of the Doctrine and Covenants, which commands a business organization of the Church. The organization was called the United Firm and was formed to manage the temporal affairs of the Church. It was headed by the leaders of the Church under the law of consecration. On March 8, Joseph Smith chose two counselors to serve with him in the presidency of the high priesthood: Jesse Gause and Sidney Rigdon. On March 15, Joseph received section 81 of the Doctrine and Covenants, which outlined Gause's duties. After Jesse Gause apostatized later in the year, his name was removed from the revelation, and the name of the man who replaced him—Frederick G. Williams—was added. The substitution is appropriate because the section outlines the duties of a counselor in the presidency; Jesse Gause's name is now included in the introduction to section 81, though it never appeared there until the 1981 edition. In a sense, the names of the current counselors in the First Presidency could just as easily be substituted into the revelation. On March 24, a tragic event happened to the Prophet Joseph Smith: he and Sidney Rigdon were tarred and feathered at Hiram, Ohio, by a mob led by disgruntled former members of the Church. Five days later,

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his adopted son Joseph Murdock Smith died as a result of the exposure he suffered during that mobbing.

Part of section 78, received on the first of March, instructed Joseph Smith to travel to Missouri to complete the organization of the United Firm. On the first day of April, he left Hiram, Ohio, for Missouri, and he took with him Newel K. Whitney, who would soon become the second bishop of the Church; Peter Whitmer, who is one of the eight witnesses; and Sidney Rigdon and Jesse Gause, his counselors in the presidency of the high priesthood. They arrived in Independence, Missouri, on April 24. Two days later, in a meeting there with the brethren, Joseph was acknowledged, or sustained, as president of the high priesthood. (In 1833, this presidency became what we now know as the First Presidency.) Section 82 was also received at that meeting, further setting up the United Firm.

In May, Joseph Smith left Independence to return to the Kirtland area. On the way, there was an accident. The horses on the stage were spooked. While trying to jump from the stage, Newel K. Whitney got a foot caught in the spokes of the wheel and broke his leg and foot quite badly. He was laid up for about four weeks in Greenville, Indiana, and Joseph Smith stayed with him. An impassioned letter from Joseph to Emma indicates that this was a very frustrating time in the life of the Prophet.

Joseph returned sometime in mid- to late June to Kirtland, Ohio. He immediately recommenced his translation of the Bible, which occupied him for the rest of the summer. He finished his work on the New Testament near the end of July and began again on the Old Testament. At that same time, he began a short history of his life, with Fredrick G. Williams acting as scribe for part of it. Included in this history was the Prophet's first known attempt to relate the First Vision in writing.

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In August, Jesse Gause and Zebedee Coltrin began a mission journey to the eastern part of the United States together. On August 19, Elder Coltrin returned to Kirtland because, as his journal records, he had a terrible headache, probably a migraine, for nineteen days. Zebedee Coltrin wrote in his journal on the nineteenth that he and Jesse had been “praying with and for each other,”¹ and that is the last we hear of Jesse Gause; he evidently apostatized.

In September, the missionaries who were called in section 75 began to return. In response to their return, Joseph Smith received section 84 of the Doctrine and Covenants. The first 102 verses were received on the twenty-second, and the remainder the following day. Sometime in late September or early October, Joseph Smith and Newel K. Whitney traveled to Albany, Boston, and New York City. One purpose for going to New York was to buy supplies for the bishops’ storehouse in Kirtland. But there was a second reason: the Lord had commanded Whitney in section 84, verses 112 to 116, to go there and to the other two cities to preach and to warn the people.

On November 6, Joseph Smith returned from this journey to the East hours after his son Joseph Smith III was born. Joseph III was the first child of Emma and Joseph Smith to survive more than a few hours. (He later became the first president of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.) Two days after the birth of Joseph III, Brigham Young, Brigham’s younger brother Joseph Young, and Heber C. Kimball arrived in Kirtland. This was shortly after their baptism, and it was the first time that Joseph Smith had ever met them. After meeting Brigham Young and knowing him for only a matter of hours, Joseph prophesied that Brigham Young would someday lead the Church. Levi Hancock recalled:

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I was living with Joseph Smith Jr. and had completed the translating room and had seen many new brethren, and had heard Joseph speak many things concerning them, but no observation sunk with such weight on my mind as the one that he made about Brigham Young and Joseph Young. Sometime in the month of Nov. 1832, these men came to Joseph Smith in the evening and sung and prayed with us. After they had gone from there Joseph Smith said to me, “how do you like the men?” or something near it. After he had got my answer he said, “these are good men,” and “there is Brigham Young, [he] is a great man and one day the whole kingdom will rest upon him; and there is the smaller one, he is a great man, but his brother [Brigham] is greater.”²

On December 6, Joseph Smith received section 86, which includes a commentary on the parable of the wheat and the tares. When this section was first put into the Doctrine and Covenants, the title was “On Priesthood.” It is a priesthood revelation, not just an explanation of a parable, and it tells us who has rights to the priesthood. On December 25, as the brethren were discussing the slave question, a voice whispered to the Prophet Joseph Smith, delivering section 87, the prophecy on war. Then on December 27 and 28 and on January 3, 1833, Joseph received section 88, which he described in a letter to Missouri as “an olive leaf . . . plucked from the tree of Paradise, the Lord’s message of peace to us.”³

There are two additional events that continued through all of 1832. One was the hard feelings and disagreements between the leaders of the Church in Kirtland and in Missouri, which was difficult to reconcile because of distance and lack of communication. This strife began the previous year, when the first group went to Missouri, and it continued throughout 1832. When Joseph Smith met with the brethren in Missouri in April

1832, he thought he had the whole thing settled. He was upset to find, when he stayed with Newell K. Whitney in Greenville, Indiana, that he had not resolved the conflict and that there were still hard feelings. Some letters confirm that this animosity remained throughout the year. Section 88, sent to Missouri with an accompanying letter, seems to have ameliorated the feelings of Church leaders in Missouri from that point on.

The other major event that took place that year was a worldwide outbreak of cholera. Thousands upon thousands died. Joseph Smith mentions in his letter from Greenville, Indiana, that he had gone to the cemetery and found many new graves of people who had passed away from it. When he went to New York, the outbreak was essentially over, and he lamented that people had already forgotten how terrible it was. Surviving correspondence, newspapers, and discourses show that Latter-day Saints viewed the outbreak as one of the judgments to come upon the earth in the last days.

Doctrine and Covenants Section 76

Among the major events in Joseph's life in 1832 was his reception of the vision of the three degrees of glory (section 76). Joseph Smith recorded:

While we were doing the work of translation, which the Lord had appointed unto us, we came to the twenty-ninth verse of the fifth chapter of John, which was given unto us as follows—

Speaking of the resurrection of the dead, concerning those who shall hear the voice of the Son of Man:

And shall come forth; they who have done good, in the resurrection of the just; and they who have done evil, in the resurrection of the unjust.

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Now this caused us to marvel, for it was given unto us of the Spirit.

And while we meditated upon these things, the Lord touched the eyes of our understandings and they were opened, and the glory of the Lord shone round about. (vv. 15–19)⁴

In his history, Joseph made this statement before recording the revelation:

“Upon my return from Amherst conference, I resumed the translation of the Scriptures. From sundry revelations which had been received, it was apparent that many important points touching the salvation of man, had been taken from the Bible, or lost before it was compiled. It appeared self-evident from what truths were left, that if God rewarded every one according to the deeds done in the body, the term ‘Heaven,’ as intended for the Saints’ eternal home, must include more kingdoms than one. Accordingly, on the 16th of February, 1832, while translating St. John’s Gospel, myself and Elder Rigdon saw the following vision.”⁵

After recording the vision, he wrote some thoughts about it:

Nothing could be more pleasing to the Saints upon the order of the Kingdom of the Lord, than the light which burst upon the world through the foregoing vision. Every law, every commandment, every promise, every truth, and every point touching the destiny of man, from Genesis to Revelation, where the purity of the Scriptures remains unsullied by the folly of men, go to show the perfection of the theory [of different degrees of glory in the future life] and witnesses the fact that that document is a transcript from the records of the eternal world. The sublimity of the ideas; the purity of the

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language; the scope for action; the continued duration for completion, in order that the heirs of salvation may confess the Lord and bow the knee; the rewards for faithfulness, and the punishments for sins, are so much beyond the narrow-mindedness of men, that every honest man is constrained to exclaim: "It came from God."⁶

According to Philo Dibble, Joseph Smith did not receive section 76 in a closed room with just Sidney Rigdon; there were at least a dozen other people viewing what was taking place. Such was the case with many of the revelations Joseph Smith received. Philo Dibble gave this familiar recollection about section 76:

The vision which is recorded in the Book of Doctrine and Covenants [D&C 76] was given at the house of "Father Johnson," in Hiram, Ohio, and during the time that Joseph and Sidney were in the spirit and saw the heavens open, there were other men in the room, perhaps twelve, among whom I was one during a part of the time—probably two-thirds of the time,—I saw the glory and felt the power, but did not see the vision.

The events and conversation, while they were seeing what is written (and many things were seen and related that are not written,) I will relate as minutely as is necessary.

Joseph would, at intervals, say: "What do I see?" as one might say while looking out the window and beholding what all in the room could not see. Then he would relate what he had seen or what he was looking at. Then Sidney replied, "I see the same." Presently Sidney would say "what do I see?" and would repeat what he had seen or was seeing, and Joseph would reply, "I see the same."

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This manner of conversation was reported at short intervals to the end of the vision, and during the whole time not a word was spoken by any other person. Not a sound nor motion made by anyone but Joseph and Sidney, and it seemed to me that they never moved a joint or limb during the time I was there, which I think was over an hour, and to the end of the vision.

Joseph sat firmly and calmly all the time in the midst of a magnificent glory, but Sidney sat limp and pale, apparently as limber as a rag, observing which, Joseph remarked, smilingly, “Sidney is not used to it as I am.”⁷

Later, in Nauvoo, Joseph Smith made this statement about section 76:

Paul ascended into the third heavens, and he could understand the three principal rounds of Jacob’s ladder—the telestial, the terrestrial, and the celestial glories or kingdoms, where Paul saw and heard things which were not lawful for him to utter. 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 them.

The Lord deals with this people as a tender parent with a child, communicating light and intelligence and the knowledge of his ways as they can bear it.⁸

Later revelations may reflect some of what Joseph Smith learned when he received section 76. For instance, section 88 tells of the laws one must live to enter the celestial kingdom, the terrestrial kingdom, and the telestial kingdom. It also outlines the order of the resurrection: those worthy of the celestial kingdom are resurrected first, the terrestrial second, and so on. Section 93 discusses the

pre-earth life. Section 130 discusses the planets God created. Section 131, which asserts there are three degrees within the celestial kingdom, also conveys a doctrine about life after death. Section 137 tells about Joseph's vision of the celestial kingdom, in which he saw his own brother Alvin.

Though we do not have the dictation copy of section 76, we assume that it was in the handwriting of Sidney Rigdon because he was there, and he and the Prophet were told to write it. The earliest surviving manuscript was recorded within a matter of days by Frederick G. Williams in a book called the Kirtland Revelation Book. Others also made copies for their own use.

Two missionaries, the Prophet Joseph's brother Samuel H. Smith and his companion, Orson Hyde, left Kirtland on February 1, sixteen days before this revelation was received. They were traveling in the state of Maine on March 21, when Samuel H. Smith recorded this experience in his journal: "Went on again. Came across a man by the name of Haskins. He told us that he had been to Kirtland and to [Hiram] (for he was a brother) and that he had been ordained an elder of the Church, and he told us that he had seen Joseph and Sidney and that they had had a vision and that they had seen great and marvilous things, and that they had got along wonderfully well in translating. Haskins was strong in the faith. Left him and went on to Portland. Tarried all night."⁹ Six days later, on the twenty-seventh, he wrote: "This day Brother Seth and Joel Johnson came from Amherst and they told us that they staid all night at my father's [Joseph Smith Sr.'s] in Kirtland. We rejoiced to hear from our brethren to the west. They had the vision with them which Joseph and Sidney had seen and we had the privilidge of reading it."¹⁰

On August 13, after the vision had been printed in the Church newspaper, *The Evening and the Morning Star*, Samuel

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Smith recorded, “The papers [meaning *The Evening and the Morning Star*] had come and we read them and the Vision was in them. This evening the sisters came together and we read the Vision to them and explained it unto them.”¹¹ Samuel did not reference the vision in his journal again, but his missionary companion, Orson Hyde, mentioned it. On September 9, he wrote, “Came up to New Rowley met the Brethren and a large no. of people from all quarters had the vision and explained it.”¹²

Some of the revelations to be published in the Book of Commandments were first printed in *The Evening and the Morning Star*. Since this vision was included in the July 1832 issue, it is assumed that it was also to be published in the Book of Commandments, but antagonists caused the publication of that book to be halted before it was finished.

Many members of the Church found the doctrine of the three degrees of glory in section 76 hard to accept, even though the Bible says, “In my Father’s house are many mansions” (John 14:2), and Paul had talked about a celestial glory, a terrestrial glory, and other glories (see 1 Corinthians 15:40–42). Mainstream Protestant thought allowed only for a heaven and a hell. Because all of the adult members of the Church in 1832 were converts, and most of them came from a Protestant background, the idea of multiple heavenly kingdoms was new to them. Grant Underwood wrote the following about Protestant theology:

After surveying the religious landscape in America in 1844, the eminent German churchman Philipp Schaff remarked that “the reigning theology of the country . . . is the theology of the Westminster Confession.” The Westminster Confession, a creedal delineation of faith formulated two hundred years earlier by Reformed divines from England

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and Scotland, declared that upon death the souls of the “righteous” were received into heaven while the “wicked” were cast into hell. “Besides these two places for souls separated from their bodies,” concluded the Confession, “the Scripture acknowledgeth none.”¹³

Until section 76, the kingdoms of glory seem only to separate the good and the bad, the righteous and the wicked, those on God’s right hand and those on his left hand, the sheep and the goats. Even section 29, verses 27 through 30, says,

And the righteous shall be gathered on my right hand unto eternal life; and the wicked on my left hand will I be ashamed to own before the Father;

Wherefore I will say unto them—Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.

And now, behold, I say unto you, never at any time have I declared from mine own mouth that they should return, for where I am they cannot come, for they have no power.

But remember that all my judgments are not given unto men; and as the words have gone forth out of my mouth even so shall they be fulfilled, that the first shall be last, and that the last shall be first in all things whatsoever I have created by the word of my power, which is the power of my Spirit.

There were some denominations that divided life after death into more than just heaven and hell. The Catholics, of course, had limbo and purgatory. One who is sometimes mentioned as having parallel beliefs is Emanuel Swedenborg, who described heaven as consisting of three divisions, though he did not call them telestial, terrestrial, and celestial. Though members of the Church today are accustomed to section 76, the early members of the Church,

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most of them former Protestants, did not know how to respond to it. President Brigham Young said:

After all, my traditions were such, that when the Vision came first to me, it was directly contrary and opposed to my former education. I said, Wait a little. I did not reject it; but I could not understand it. I then could feel what incorrect tradition had done for me. Suppose all that I have ever heard from my priest and parents—the way they taught me to read the Bible—had been true, my understanding would be diametrically opposed to the doctrine revealed in the Vision. I used to think and pray, to read and think, until I knew and fully understood it for myself, by the visions of the Holy Spirit. At first it actually came in contact with my own feelings, though I never could believe like the mass of the Christian world around me; but I did not know how nigh I believed, as they did. I found, however, that I was so nigh, I could shake hands with them any time I wished.¹⁴

Joseph Smith’s instructions to the first missionaries in England were, “To adhere closely to the first principles of the Gospel, and remain silent concerning the gathering, the vision, and the Book of Doctrine and Covenants, until such time as the work was fully established, and it should be clearly made manifest by the Spirit to do otherwise.”¹⁵ One of those early missionaries to England was Joseph Fielding, who had been born in England. He approached a relative, Timothy Matthews, who was the minister of a church. When Joseph explained to him that he was now a missionary from America with a gospel to preach, Timothy Matthews was excited to hear it, so he invited the missionaries to preach in his church after regular Sabbath services and during the week. Joseph Smith’s history records: “The Elders at Bedford continued to lecture in the

basement of Mr. Matthews' chapel from evening to evening, with the most flattering prospects until this evening, when Elder [John] Goodson, contrary to the most positive instructions of President Kimball [Heber C. Kimball], and without advising with any one, read publicly the vision from the Doctrine and Covenants, which turned the current of feeling generally, and nearly closed the door in all that region."¹⁶

The vision overwhelmed the people in that congregation. Joseph Smith had said earlier that he could reveal a hundred times more if the people were prepared and if the Lord permitted it. These people were not prepared, so Timothy Matthews would not let the missionaries preach in his church any longer.

Mysteries

Having related the background of section 76, I will expound on two important doctrines therein. Section 76 reads:

For thus saith the Lord—I, the Lord, am merciful and gracious unto those who fear me, and delight to honor those who serve me in righteousness and in truth unto the end.

Great shall be their reward and eternal shall be their glory.

And to them will I reveal all mysteries, yea, all the hidden mysteries of my kingdom from days of old, and for ages to come, will I make known unto them the good pleasure of my will concerning all things pertaining to my kingdom.

Yea, even the wonders of eternity shall they know, and things to come will I show them, even the things of many generations.

And their wisdom shall be great, and their understanding reach to heaven; and before them the wisdom of the wise

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shall perish, and the understanding of the prudent shall come to naught.

For by my Spirit will I enlighten them, and by my power will I make known unto them the secrets of my will—yea, even those things which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor yet entered into the heart of man. (vv. 5–10)

Therefore, the Lord is willing to reveal eternal truths to the obedient. The word *mystery* in the New Testament comes from the Greek *mysterion*, a derivative of *muō*, which means “to shut the mouth.” Many mysteries of the Church are taught in the temple, where we are instructed to not speak about them; they are only for the initiated. Verses five through ten allow us to also receive mysteries via personal revelation if we are faithful. This definition of mystery also fits the Book of Mormon. Alma 12 reads, “It is given unto many to know the mysteries of God; nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant unto the children of men” (v. 9).

Section 76 expounds upon the degree of revelation the Lord is willing to grant. Though Joseph Smith said he could give the Saints a hundred times more, the Lord would not allow it because we could not bear it. Alma 12 continues, commanding men that they should “not impart only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant unto the children of men, according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him. And therefore, he that will harden his heart, the same receiveth the lesser portion of the word; and he that will not harden his heart, to him is given the greater portion of the word, until it is given unto him to know the mysteries of God until he know them in full” (vv. 9–10).

In other words, it is given him to know everything that the Lord is willing to reveal in this day and age. Verse 11 continues,

“And they that will harden their hearts, to them is given the lesser portion of the word until they know nothing concerning his mysteries [in other words, they no longer understand what they once understood]; and then they are taken captive by the devil, and led by his will down to destruction. Now this is what is meant by the chains of hell.”

Section 76 teaches more about the mysteries of God. Verses 113–15 say, “This is the end of the vision which we saw, which we were commanded to write while we were yet in the Spirit. But great and marvelous are the works of the Lord, and the mysteries of his kingdom which he showed unto us, which surpass all understanding in glory, and in might, and in dominion; which he commanded us we should not write while we were yet in the Spirit, and are not lawful for man to utter.”

Thus, these verses teach us to keep sacred the mysteries that God reveals to us. Verses 116–18 continue, “Neither is man capable to make them known, for they are only to be seen and understood by the power of the Holy Spirit, which God bestows on those who love him, and purify themselves before him; to whom he grants this privilege of seeing and knowing for themselves; that through the power and manifestation of the Spirit, while in the flesh, they may be able to bear his presence in the world of glory.”

Because of the brevity of section 76, we now have a whole new series of questions about life after death. But the Lord has revealed all that he is willing to reveal at this time, except to those to whom he would reveal it personally, and then he commands them to say nothing about it. Four statements from Church leaders develop the idea of mysteries.

Joseph Smith said: “Let us be faithful and silent, brethren, and if God gives you a manifestation, keep it to yourselves; be

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watchful and prayerful, and you shall have a prelude of those joys that God will pour out on that day.”¹⁷

His brother Hyrum said: “Therefore beware what you teach! for the mysteries of God are not given to all men; and unto those to whom they are given they are placed under restrictions to impart only such as God will command them; and the residue is to be kept in a faithful breast, otherwise he will be brought under condemnation. By this God will prove his faithful servants, who will be called and numbered with the chosen.”¹⁸

Deciding to keep our sacred experiences to ourselves saves our audience from having to judge whether the experience really happened and if it is appropriate to share. If the Lord wanted to spread an important revelation beyond one person, he would give it to the prophet, who could then share it with the Church. If the Lord sends to one person an angel or an important revelation, that is for that one person, and that person alone.

President Brigham Young gave two important statements about sharing revelation:

There is one principle that I wish the people would understand and lay to heart. Just as fast as you will prove before your God that you are worthy to receive the mysteries, if you please to call them so, of the Kingdom of heaven—that you are full of confidence in God—that you will never betray a thing that God tells you—that you will never reveal to your neighbour that which ought not to be revealed, as quick as you prepare to be entrusted with the things of God, there is an eternity of them to bestow upon you. Instead of pleading with the Lord to bestow more upon you, plead with yourselves to have confidence in yourselves, to have integrity in yourselves, and know when to speak and what to speak,

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what to reveal, and how to carry yourselves and walk before the Lord. And just as fast as you prove to Him that you will preserve everything secret that ought to be—that you will deal out to your neighbours all which you ought, and no more, and learn how to dispense your knowledge to your families, friends, neighbours, and brethren, the Lord will bestow upon you, and give to you, and bestow upon you, until finally he will say to you, “You shall never fall; your salvation is sealed unto you; you are sealed up unto eternal life and salvation, through your integrity.”¹⁹

Thus, we are to dispense that which the Lord has given to all mankind—the scriptures and teachings of the brethren. Personal revelation is exactly that, *personal*, and should be kept within the person who received it. The second statement by Brigham Young was given just a few weeks before the first:

Now I want to tell you that which, perhaps, many of you do not know. Should you receive a vision of revelation from the Almighty, one that the Lord gave you concerning yourselves, or this people, but which you are not to reveal on account of your not being the proper person, or because it ought not to be known by the people at present, you should shut it up and seal it as close, and lock it as tight as heaven is to you, and make it as secret as the grave. The Lord has no confidence in those who reveal secrets, for He cannot safely reveal Himself to such persons. It is as much as He can do to get a particle of sense into some of the best and most influential men in the Church, in regard to real confidence in themselves. They cannot keep things within their own bosoms.²⁰

Based on this principle, the Lord might reveal something such as the name of a new stake president to a member of the

Church. He would do that so that when the name is presented, that member can say, “Yes. I know that he is supposed to be the stake president.” Through that revelation, the Lord gives that member a special witness that he has chosen that man. Personal revelation is important in this Church, but so is keeping confidences within ourselves. Verses 5–10 of section 76 teach a tremendous lesson: The Lord is willing to reveal many things to those who prove faithful and obedient and who will keep their confidences.

The Testimony of Jesus

A second important doctrine section 76 teaches is the testimony of Joseph Smith concerning the Father and the Son. Verse 19 begins this testimony:

And while we meditated upon these things, the Lord touched the eyes of our understandings and they were opened, and the glory of the Lord shone round about.

And we beheld the glory of the Son, on the right hand of the Father [two separate beings], and received of his fulness;

And saw the holy angels, and them who are sanctified before his throne, worshipping God, and the Lamb, who worship him forever and ever.

And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him: That he lives!

For we saw him, even on the right hand of God; and we heard the voice bearing record that he is the Only Begotten of the Father—

That by him, and through him, and of him, the worlds are and were created, and the inhabitants thereof are begotten sons and daughters unto God. (vv. 19–24)

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Joseph said, “This is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him.” Joseph had the First Vision in the spring of 1820. In February of 1832, twelve years later, he received the vision of the three degrees of glory, in which he also saw the Father and the Son. In July of 1832, a few months later, section 76 was published in *The Evening and the Morning Star*. The members of the Church now had the Prophet Joseph Smith’s testimony of the truth that God and the Savior are separate beings and of the role of the Savior as Creator. The very next month, August 1832, Joseph Smith wrote the First Vision down for the first time of which we have any record. He would write it again in 1838 in the form that now appears in the Pearl of Great Price, but that account was not published until 1842, when it was printed in *Times and Seasons*. Interestingly, the First Vision was not published until ten years after this vision of the Father and Son that is recorded in section 76. So, playing on words, the “last” testimony was the first one published, and the *First* Vision was the last one of the two published. Few members of the Church knew about the First Vision prior to section 76. Numerous journal entries reveal that it was not the First Vision but the Book of Mormon that aided in the conversion of the Saints in Joseph’s day. The vision of section 76 was thus the first of Joseph’s testimonies of the Savior to which the Saints had access.

The importance of a testimony of the Savior is revealed in verse 51, which describes the people in the celestial kingdom as those who received the testimony of Jesus, believed on his name, were baptized, etc. Thus, the testimony of Jesus is a qualification to enter the celestial kingdom. Verse 74 discusses the terrestrial kingdom: those entering the terrestrial kingdom are they who received not the testimony of Jesus in the flesh but received it afterwards. Verse 79 also says of those in the terrestrial world:

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“These are they who are not valiant in the testimony of Jesus; wherefore, they obtain not the crown over the kingdom of our God.” So the testimony of Jesus is also taken into consideration for those who enter the terrestrial kingdom. Verse 82 mentions those in the telestial kingdom: “These are they who received not the gospel of Christ, neither the testimony of Jesus.” The Lord repeats himself in verse 101, saying that those in the telestial kingdom “received not the gospel, neither the testimony of Jesus, neither the prophets, neither the everlasting covenant.” But verse 110 says of these souls, “These all shall bow the knee, and every tongue shall confess to him who sits upon the throne forever and ever.” Those in outer darkness are excluded because they fight against the testimony of Jesus, against the Savior. Verse 35 describes those in outer darkness: “Having denied the Holy Spirit after having received it, and having denied the Only Begotten Son of the Father, having crucified him unto themselves and put him to an open shame.” Thus, what an individual does with the testimony of Jesus becomes an important consideration at the time of judgment.

Two latter-day Church authorities further emphasize the importance of the testimony of Jesus Christ. First, President Ezra Taft Benson said, “A most priceless blessing available to every member of the Church is a testimony of the divinity of Jesus Christ and His Church. A testimony is one of the few possessions we may take with us when we leave this life.” He then defines a testimony of Jesus:

To have a testimony of Jesus is to possess knowledge through the Holy Ghost of the divine mission of Jesus Christ.

A testimony of Jesus is to know the divine nature of our Lord’s birth—that He is indeed the Only Begotten Son in the flesh.

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A testimony of Jesus is to know that He was the promised Messiah and that while He sojourned among men He accomplished many mighty miracles.

A testimony of Jesus is to know that the laws which He prescribed as His doctrine are true and then to abide by these laws and ordinances.

To possess a testimony of Jesus is to know that He voluntarily took upon Himself the sins of all mankind in the Garden of Gethsemane, which caused Him to suffer in both body and spirit and to bleed from every pore. All this He did so that we would not have to suffer if we would repent.

To possess a testimony of Jesus is to know that He came forth triumphantly from the grave with a physical, resurrected body. And because He lives, so shall all mankind.

Thus, part of having a testimony of Jesus is to know that one will be resurrected as he was. President Benson continues:

To possess a testimony of Jesus is to know that God the Father and Jesus Christ did indeed appear to the Prophet Joseph Smith to establish a new dispensation of His gospel so that salvation may be preached to all nations before He comes.

To possess a testimony of Jesus is to know that the Church, which He established in the meridian of time and restored in modern times is, as the Lord has declared, “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth” (D&C 1:30).

Having such a testimony is vital. But of even greater importance is being valiant in our testimony.

To be valiant in a testimony of Jesus means that we accept the divine mission of Jesus Christ, embrace His gospel, and

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do His works. It also means we accept the prophetic mission of Joseph Smith and his successors and follow their counsel. As Jesus said, “Whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same.”²¹

This talk by President Benson offers a fairly comprehensive list of the various components of the testimony of Jesus. But it is not enough simply to have a testimony of Jesus; one must also be valiant in that testimony. Elder Bruce R. McConkie teaches what it means to be valiant in the testimony of Jesus:

Now, what does it mean to be valiant in the testimony of Jesus?

It is to be courageous and bold; to use all our strength, energy, and ability in the warfare with the world: to fight the good fight of faith. “Be strong and of a good courage,” the Lord commanded Joshua, and then specified that this strength and courage consisted of meditating upon and observing to do all that is written in the law of the Lord. (See Josh. 1:6–9.) The great cornerstone of valiance in the cause of righteousness is obedience to the whole law of the whole gospel.

To be valiant in the testimony of Jesus is to “come unto Christ, and be perfected in him”; it is to deny ourselves “of all ungodliness,” and “love God” with all our “might, mind and strength” (Moro. 10:32).

To be valiant in the testimony of Jesus is to believe in Christ and his gospel with unshakable conviction. It is to know of the verity and divinity of the Lord’s work on earth.

But this is not all. It is more than believing and knowing. We must be doers of the word and not hearers only (James 1:22). It is more than lip service; it is not simply confessing

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with the mouth the divine sonship of the Savior. It is obedience and conformity and personal righteousness. “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21).

To be valiant in the testimony of Jesus is to “press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men.” It is to “endure to the end” (2 Ne. 31:20). It is to live our religion, to practice what we preach, to keep the commandments. It is the manifestation of “pure religion” in the lives of men; it is visiting “the fatherless and widows in their affliction” and keeping ourselves “unspotted from the world” (James 1:27).

To be valiant in the testimony of Jesus is to bridle our passions, control our appetites, and rise above carnal and evil things. It is to overcome the world as did he who is our prototype and who himself was the most valiant of all our Father’s children. It is to be morally clean, to pay our tithes and offerings, to honor the Sabbath day, to pray with full purpose of heart, to lay our all upon the altar if called upon to do so.²²

Elder McConkie then summarized: “To be valiant in the testimony of Jesus is to take the Lord’s side on every issue. It is to vote as he would vote. It is to think what he thinks, to believe what he believes, to say what he would say and do what he would do in the same situation. It is to have the mind of Christ and be one with him as he is one with his Father.”

That is a marvelous statement. Then, because we do not see all things clearly, he adds:

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Our doctrine is clear; its application sometimes seems to be more difficult. Perhaps some personal introspection might be helpful. For instance:

Am I valiant in the testimony of Jesus if my chief interest and concern in life is laying up in store the treasures of the earth, rather than the building up of the kingdom?

Am I valiant if I have more of this world’s goods than my just needs and wants require and I do not draw from my surplus to support missionary work, build temples, and care for the needy?

Am I valiant if my approach to the Church and its doctrines is intellectual only, if I am more concerned with having a religious dialogue on this or that point than I am on gaining a personal spiritual experience?²³

I have taught from the Doctrine and Covenants for many years, and if I did not have a testimony of Joseph Smith and of these revelations, I would have abandoned the institute of religion classroom and taught math and physics, which I was originally trained to do. However, I know the revelations in the Doctrines and Covenants are from the Lord, and that section 76 privileges Latter-day Saints with a new perspective on life after death. However, there is more revelation for us to receive, and we need to live worthily so we can obtain it and be worthy to stand in the presence of the Lord at the last day.

Notes

1. Zebedee Coltrin Journal, August 19, 1832, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

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2. Handwritten Statement by Levi Ward Hancock (1803–1882), Church History Library; some grammar and spelling modernized.
3. Introduction to Doctrine and Covenants section 88.
4. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 1:245.
5. Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:252–53.
6. “Joseph Smith, the Prophet,” *Historical Record*, January 1888, 402.
7. Philo Dibble, in *Juvenile Instructor*, May 1892, 303–4.
8. Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:402.
9. Samuel H. Smith Journal, March 21, 1832, Church History Library.
10. Smith Journal, March 27, 1832.
11. Smith Journal, August 13, 1832.
12. Orson Hyde Journal, September 9, 1832, Church History Library.
13. Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 54.
14. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1858), 6:281.
15. Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:492.
16. Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:505.
17. Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:309.
18. Hyrum Smith, “Our City, and the Present Aspect of Affairs,” *Times and Seasons*, March 15, 1844, 471.
19. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:371.
20. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:288.
21. Ezra Taft Benson, “Valiant in the Testimony of Jesus,” *Ensign*, February 1987, 2.
22. Bruce R. McConkie, “Valiant in the Fight of Faith,” *Ensign*, November 1974, 33.
23. McConkie, “Valiant in the Fight of Faith,” 33.