

# Joseph Smith and “The Only True and Living Church”

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SEVERAL YEARS AGO, MY COLLEAGUE Brent Top and I sat with two Protestant ministers for a few hours in what proved to be a delightful and extremely enlightening conversation. Absent was any sense of defensiveness or any effort to argue and debate; we were earnestly trying to understand one another better. Toward the end of the discussion, one of the ministers turned to me and said: “Bob, it bothers you a great deal, doesn’t it, when people suggest that Latter-day Saints are not Christian?” I responded: “It doesn’t just *bother* me. It *hurts* me, for I know how deeply as a Latter-day Saint I love the Lord and how completely I trust in Him.”

My Protestant friend then made a rather simple observation, one that should have been obvious to me long before that particular moment. He said: “How do you think it makes us feel when we know of your belief in what you call the Apostasy, of the fact that Christ presumably said to the young Joseph Smith that the

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churches on earth at that time ‘were all wrong,’ that ‘all their creeds [are] an abomination in [my] sight,’ that ‘those professors were all corrupt’ (Joseph Smith—History 1:19), and that in your Doctrine and Covenants your church is identified as ‘the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth’ (D&C 1:30)?” I can still remember the collage of feelings that washed over me at that moment: it was a quiet epiphany, coupled with feelings of empathy, sudden realization, and a deep sense of love for my friends. For a brief time I found myself, mentally speaking, walking in their moccasins, seeing things through their eyes. It was sobering, and it has affected the way I seek to reach out to men and women of other faiths.

### What “Only True Church” Does Not Mean

In the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants, a revelation given to Joseph Smith in November 1831, the Lord refers to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth” (D&C 1:30). Admittedly, this is strong language; it is hard doctrine, words that are offensive to people of other faiths. It may be helpful to consider briefly what the phrase “the only true and living church” means and what it does *not* mean. In what follows, I offer my own views, my own perspective. First, let’s deal with what the phrase does *not* mean.

1. It does not mean that men and women of other Christian faiths are not sincere believers in truth and genuine followers of the Christ. Latter-day Saints have no difficulty whatsoever accepting a person’s personal affirmation that they are Christian, that they acknowledge Jesus Christ as the divine Son of God, their Savior, the Lord and Master of their life. Nor are Latter-day Saints the only

ones entitled to personal illumination and divine guidance for their lives.

2. It does not mean that they are worshiping "a different Jesus," as many in the Christian world often say of the Latter-day Saints. True Christians worship Jesus of Nazareth, the promised Messiah.

3. It does not mean we believe that most of the doctrines in Catholic or Protestant Christianity are false or that the leaders of the various branches of Christianity have improper motives. The Prophet Joseph Smith stated: "The inquiry is frequently made of me, 'Wherein do you differ from others in your religious views?' In reality and essence, we do not differ so far in our religious views, but that we could all drink into one principle of love. One of the grand fundamental principles of 'Mormonism' is to receive truth, let it come from whence it may."<sup>1</sup> "Have the Presbyterians any truth?" he asked on another occasion. "Yes. Have the Baptists, Methodists, etc., any truth? Yes. . . . We should gather all the good and true principles in the world and treasure them up, or we shall not come out true 'Mormons.'"<sup>2</sup> President George Albert Smith thus declared to those of other faiths: "We have come not to take away from you the truth and virtue you possess. We have come not to find fault with you nor criticize you. We have not come here to berate you. . . . We . . . say to you: 'Keep all the good that you have, and let us bring to you more good.'"<sup>3</sup>

4. It does not mean that the Bible has been so corrupted that it cannot be relied upon to teach us sound doctrine and provide an example of how to live. But what of the Latter-day Saint belief that plain and precious truths and many covenants of the Lord were removed from the Bible before its compilation (see 1 Nephi 13:20–40; Moses 1:40–41)?<sup>4</sup> While we do not subscribe to a doctrine of scriptural inerrancy, we do believe that the hand of God

has been over the preservation of the biblical materials. In the words of Elder Bruce R. McConkie, “We cannot avoid the conclusion that a divine providence is directing all things as they should be. This means that the Bible, as it now is, contains that portion of the Lord’s word” that the present world is prepared to receive.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, although Latter-day Saints do not believe that the Bible now contains all that it once contained, the Bible is a remarkable book of scripture, one that inspires, motivates, reproveth, corrects, and instructs (see 2 Timothy 3:16). It is the word of God. Our task, according to President George Q. Cannon, is to engender faith in the Bible:

As our duty is to create faith in the word of God in the mind of the young student, we scarcely think that object is best attained by making the mistakes of translators [or transmitters] the more prominent part of our teachings. Even children have their doubts, but it is not our business to encourage those doubts. Doubts never convert; negations seldom convince. . . . The clause in the Articles of Faith regarding mistakes in the translation of the Bible was never inserted to encourage us to spend our time in searching out and studying those errors, but to emphasize the idea that it is the truth and the truth only that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints accepts, no matter where it is found.<sup>6</sup>

In a revelation received in February 1831 that embraces “the law of the Church,” the early Saints were instructed, “And again, the elders, priests and teachers of this church shall teach the principles of my gospel, which are in the Bible and the Book of Mormon, in the which is the fulness of the gospel” (D&C 42:12). In 1982 Elder McConkie explained to Church leaders, “Before we can write the gospel

in our own book of life we must learn the gospel as it is written in the books of scripture. The Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants—each of them individually and all of them collectively—contain the fulness of the everlasting gospel.”<sup>7</sup>

While Latter-day Saints do not believe that one can derive divine authority to perform the saving ordinances from the scriptures, we do say that the Bible contains the fulness of the gospel in the sense that (1) it teaches about groups of people in the past who enjoyed the full blessings of the everlasting gospel, and (2) it teaches (especially the New Testament) the good news or glad tidings of redemption in Christ through the Atonement (see 3 Nephi 27:13–21; D&C 76:40–42).

5. It does not mean that God disapproves of or rejects all that devoted Christians are teaching or doing, where their heart is, and what they hope to accomplish in the religious world. In April 1843, Pelatiah Brown sought to silence certain critics of the LDS Church by stretching and twisting the meaning of passages from the book of Revelation to make his point. After Brother Brown had been disciplined for doing so, Joseph Smith said: “I did not like the old man being called up for erring in doctrine. It looks too much like the Methodist, and not like the Latter-day Saints. Methodists have creeds which a man must believe or be asked out of their church. I want the liberty of thinking and believing as I please. It feels so good not to be trammled. It does not prove that a man is not a good man because he errs in doctrine.”<sup>8</sup>

“God, the Father of us all,” Elder Ezra Taft Benson said, “uses the men of the earth, especially good men, to accomplish his purposes. It has been true in the past, it is true today, it will be true in the future.” Elder Benson then quoted the following from a conference address delivered by Elder

Orson F. Whitney in 1928: “Perhaps the Lord needs such men on the outside of His Church to help it along. They are among its auxiliaries, and can do more good for the cause where the Lord has placed them, than anywhere else.” Now note this particularly poignant message: “God is using more than one people for the accomplishment of His great and marvelous work. The Latter-day Saints cannot do it all. It is too vast, too arduous for any one people.” Elder Whitney then pointed out that we have no warfare with other churches. “They are our partners in a certain sense.”<sup>9</sup>

In June 1829, Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer were instructed to “contend against no church, save it be the church of the devil” (D&C 18:20). B. H. Roberts offered this insightful commentary upon this passage:

I understand the injunction to Oliver Cowdery to “contend against no church, save it be the church of the devil,” to mean that he shall contend against evil, against untruth, against all combinations of wicked men. They constitute the church of the devil, the kingdom of evil, a federation of unrighteousness; and the servants of God have a right to contend against that which is evil, let it appear where it will. . . . But, let it be understood, we are not brought necessarily into antagonism with the various sects of Christianity as such. So far as they have retained fragments of Christian truth—and each of them has some measure of truth—that far they are acceptable unto the Lord; and it would be poor policy for us to contend against them without discrimination. . . . Our relationship to the religious world is not one that calls for the denunciation of sectarian churches as composing the church of the devil.

Elder Roberts continued, demonstrating the breadth necessary to reach out and understand our brothers and sisters of other faiths:

All that makes for untruth, for unrighteousness constitutes the kingdom of evil—the church of the devil. All that makes for truth, for righteousness, is of God; it constitutes the kingdom of righteousness—the empire of Jehovah; and, in a certain sense at least, constitutes the Church of Christ. With the latter—the kingdom of righteousness—we have no warfare. On the contrary both the spirit of the Lord's commandments to his servants and the dictates of right reason would suggest that we seek to enlarge this kingdom of righteousness both by recognizing such truths as it possesses and seeking the friendship and cooperation of the righteous men and women who constitute its membership.<sup>10</sup>

6. It does not mean that God-fearing Christians who are not Latter-day Saints will not go to heaven. Mormons should not in any way minimize or deny the reality of another person's experience with the Spirit of God, nor should we question the legitimacy of another's commitment to Jesus Christ. To say that another way, we do not doubt that many who claim to have had a mighty change of heart have in fact been "born again."<sup>11</sup> Christians who are somewhat acquainted with Latter-day Saint beliefs might well respond at this point: "Yes, but do you believe that persons of other faiths will inherit the celestial kingdom?" Latter-day Saints do believe that baptism by proper authority is necessary for entrance into the highest heaven; the baptismal ordinance is an outward expression of one's personal inward covenant with Christ and acceptance of his gospel. At the same time, Latter-day Saint doctrine affirms that all men and women will receive all of the light,

knowledge, divine attributes, powers, and heavenly rewards they desire to receive, either in this life or the next. One who seeks with all his soul to come unto Christ will be welcomed eventually into His presence. One who earnestly yearns to qualify for the highest of glories hereafter will have that opportunity. That means that those who are true to the light they have here will open themselves to greater light.

7. Our belief that we are “the only true and living church” does not mean that Latter-day Saints desire to “do their own thing” or face social challenges on their own. To be sure, we strive earnestly to work together with men and women of other faiths, to stand up and speak out against the rising tide of immorality and ethical relativism that is spreading in our world. With most Christian groups, we are persuaded that the changes to be made in our society can only come about “from the inside out”—through the transforming powers of Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, I am convinced that if we allow doctrinal differences, stereotyping, and demonizing of those who are different to prevent us from joining hands in halting the erosion of time-honored moral and family values, Lucifer will win a major victory.

### What “Only True Church” Means

What, then, does the revelation mean when it states that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth”?

1. “The word *only*,” Elder Neal A. Maxwell wrote, “asserts a uniqueness and singularity about [the Church] as the exclusive ecclesiastical, authority-bearing agent for our Father in heaven in this dispensation.”<sup>13</sup>

The word *true* is derived from the Old English word *treowe*, meaning honest, upright, virtuous, straightfor-



ward, loyal, faithful, steady and steadfast, constant, fitting, proper, consistent with fact, conforming with reality, conforming to a standard or pattern, accurately positioned, germane, correctly balanced or aligned, precise, and secure. It is related closely to such words as *trust*, *truce*, and *betrothed*.<sup>14</sup> Thus, to refer to the restored Church as “the only true church” is to speak of it as being the most steady, sure, and solid institution on earth, the closest to the pattern of the primitive Christian Church, in terms of dispensing the mind and will of God and enjoying His complete approbation. It does not suggest that other churches are mostly false or that their teachings are completely corrupt. Elder Maxwell pointed out:

When the Lord used the designation “true,” he implied that the doctrines of the Church and its authority are not just partially true, but true as measured by divine standards. The Church is not, therefore, conceptually compromised by having been made up from doctrinal debris left over from another age, nor is it comprised of mere fragments of the true faith. It is based upon the fullness of the gospel of him whose name it bears, thus passing the two tests for proving his church that were given by Jesus during his visit to the Nephites (3 Nephi 27:8).

When the word *living* is used, it carries a divinely deliberate connotation. The Church is neither dead nor dying. The Church, like the living God who established it, is alive, aware, and functioning. It is not a museum that houses a fossilized faith; rather, it is a kinetic kingdom characterized by living faith in living disciples.<sup>15</sup>

2. “The only true and living church” means that doctrinal finality rests with apostles and prophets, not theologians or scholars. One professor of religion at a Christian institution remarked to me: “You know, Bob, one of the

things I love about my way of life as a religious academician is that no one is looking over my shoulder to check my doctrine and analyze the truthfulness of my teachings. Because there is no organizational hierarchy to which I am required to answer, I am free to write and declare whatever I choose.” I nodded and chose not to respond at the time. I have thought since then, however, that what my friend perceives to be a marvelous academic freedom can become license to interpret, intuit, or do an exegesis on a scriptural passage in a myriad of ways, resulting in interpretations as diverse as the backgrounds, training, and proclivities of the persons involved. There are simply too many ambiguous sections of scripture to “let the Bible speak for itself.” This was young Joseph Smith’s dilemma: “The teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling [his religious questions] by an appeal to the Bible” (Joseph Smith—History 1:12).

In many cases, neither linguistic analysis nor historical background will produce the divinely intended meaning of such questions as: Is God completely sovereign over all things, or does He limit His control by allowing freedom of the will? Is the creation account in Genesis literal or figurative? Was the flood in the days of Noah local or global? Was Christ both fully God and fully human during His ministry, or did He relinquish His divinity for a season? Are only the predestined saved, or do all have the potential for full salvation? Can men and women enjoy eternal security from the moment of their spiritual rebirth, or must they endure faithfully to the end to have eternal life? Are the unevangelized forever damned, or will they have an opportunity to learn the message of Christ? Is baptism essential to salvation, and how and to whom must it be administered? Did the gifts of the Spirit cease with the

Apostles? To what extent are they enjoyed today? Should women serve in certain ministerial capacities?<sup>16</sup>

Some of these matters are not insignificant. Who decides which interpretation is that which Matthew or Paul or Jesus Himself intended? “Some things in scripture are not perfectly clear,” Evangelical pastor-teacher John MacArthur wrote. “Sometimes we cannot reconstruct the historical context to understand a given passage. One notable example is the mention of ‘baptism for the dead’ in 1 Corinthians 15:29. There are at least forty different views about what that verse means. We cannot be dogmatic about such things.”<sup>17</sup> MacArthur also stated that if one were to attend a typical Bible study, one would “probably be invited to share [one’s] opinion about ‘what this verse means to *me*,’ as if the message of Scripture were unique to every individual. Rare is the teacher who is concerned with what Scripture means to *God*.”<sup>18</sup> What is the standard by which we judge and interpret? Who has the right to offer inspired commentary on words delivered by holy men of God who spoke or wrote anciently as they were moved upon by the Holy Spirit (see 2 Peter 1:21)? While each reader of holy writ should seek to be in tune with the Spirit enough to understand what is intended by the scripture, Latter-day Saints believe the final word on prophetic interpretation rests with prophets. As C. S. Lewis wisely remarked, “Unless the measuring rod is independent of the things measured, we can do no measuring.”<sup>19</sup>

In writing of *sola scriptura* (the scriptures alone) as a tenet of the Reformation, Randall Balmer observed:

Luther’s sentiments created a demand for Scriptures in the vernacular, and Protestants ever since have stubbornly insisted on interpreting the Bible for themselves,

forgetting most of the time that they come to the text with their own set of cultural biases and personal agendas.

Underlying this insistence on individual interpretation is the assumption . . . that the plainest, most evident reading of the text is the proper one. Everyone becomes his or her own theologian. There is no longer any need to consult Augustine or Thomas Aquinas or Martin Luther about their understanding of various passages when you yourself are the final arbiter of what is the correct reading. This tendency, together with the absence of any authority structure within Protestantism, has created a kind of theological free-for-all, as various individuals or groups insist that their reading of the Bible is the only possible interpretation.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, I have had a number of friends and colleagues from either Protestant or Catholic faiths ask how Latter-day Saints can reconcile the idea of an apostasy of the primitive Church with Jesus's commendation of Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi ("Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God"). We recall that the Savior said: "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:16–18). Did the Lord not clearly state in this passage that Satan would not prevail over the Christian Church?

One thing is sure: the Church was not to be built upon Peter or any one individual but rather upon the revealed word, the revelation that came to Peter and affirmed the divine sonship of the Master.<sup>21</sup> It was as though Christ were saying: "Peter, you have gained the witness of who I am by revelation from God, and it is by revelation, by the immediate direction from heaven to and through my

anointed servants, that I will build my Church. And as long as my people live in such a manner as to enjoy that spirit of revelation—individually and institutionally—the power and dominion of the devil will never be allowed to prevail over my kingdom.”

3. It means that while God will bless and strengthen and lead any person who follows the divine light within (see John 1:9), each man or woman is responsible to be true to that light which leads unto all truth, to seek, search, weigh, and prove all things. A modern revelation attests: “That which is of God is light; and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day” (D&C 50:24), meaning, presumably, the day of resurrection and glorification. A later revelation states that one who is true to the light of conscience, true to what we would call the Judeo-Christian ethic, will be led to the higher light of the fulness of the gospel, either in this life or the next. “And the Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world; and the Spirit enlighteneth every man through the world, that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit. And every one that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit cometh unto God, even the Father. And the Father teacheth him of the [gospel] covenant which he has renewed and confirmed upon you” (D&C 84:46–48).

There is a vital balance to be struck here. The Book of Mormon clearly points out that “the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil.” Mormon wrote, “Wherefore, I show unto you the way to judge; for every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God” (Moroni 7:16). At the same time, the Father of Lights does not desire His children to coast spiritu-

ally, to rest content with the light and truth they have; He expects all to grow in perspective and understanding. As C. S. Lewis observed, that God who “will, in the long run, be satisfied with nothing less than absolute perfection, will also be delighted with the first feeble, stumbling effort you make tomorrow to do the simplest duty.” Then, quoting his mentor George MacDonald, Lewis noted, “God is easy to please, but hard to satisfy.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, the highest good that men and women can do is to seek tenaciously for the greatest amount of light and knowledge that God will bestow (see D&C 35:10–12; 84:49–50).

### Creeds and Christendom

According to one of the accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision (1838), Joseph learned that “all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: ‘they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof’” (Joseph Smith—History 1:19). This statement is, of course, considered to be harsh and hurtful to members of other Christian churches. Let’s see if we can clarify things somewhat. For example, what were the “creeds” spoken of? Originally the Latin word *credo* meant simply, “I believe.” In Joseph Smith’s day, the word *creed* referred to “a brief summary of the articles of Christian faith” or “that which is believed.”<sup>23</sup> A modern dictionary defines a creed as “a system of religious belief” or “a set of opinions or principles on any subject” or a “belief or confidence in; an article of faith.”<sup>24</sup> By these definitions there is nothing specifically wrong with a creed.

Roman Catholic scholar Luke Timothy Johnson has written that “being part of the intelligentsia has meant despising creeds in general and Christianity’s creed in

particular." Johnson pointed out that "for modernity, belief in a creed is a sign of intellectual failure. Creeds involve faith, and faith makes statements about reality that can't be tested. Everyone knows that statements can be true only when they don't really say anything about the world or when they have been empirically tested. Creeds are therefore structures of fantasy. One cannot be both a believer and a critical thinker." He further noted: "A significant number of Christians reject any form of the creed. For some, especially in the Anabaptist and Free Church traditions, the creed is too much an instrument of ecclesiastical tradition and power, too much associated with the development of Christianity into Catholicism, too much shaped by philosophy and too little by Scripture."<sup>25</sup>

Alexander Campbell, a contemporary of Joseph Smith and the father of the Disciples of Christ and Church of Christ movements, was particularly troubled by creeds. "Following the American Revolution," Milton Backman Jr. noted, "a number of theologians vehemently condemned all the popular creeds of Christendom. Urging all disciples of Christ to return to the purity of New Testament Christianity, these preachers taught that the Bible should be regarded as the only standard of faith, that every congregation should be autonomous, and that all men are endowed with the capacity to accept or reject God's gift of salvation. Although these resolute leaders were divided concerning the doctrine of the Godhead, they rejected the use of the term 'Trinity,' claiming that such a word was unscriptural."<sup>26</sup>

Joseph Smith was not necessarily opposed to religious creeds in general. In the preface to the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants (1835) is found this fascinating remark: "There may be an aversion in the minds of some against receiving any thing purporting to be articles of

religious faith, in consequence of there being so many now extant; but if men believe a system, and profess that it was given by inspiration, certainly, the more intelligibly they can present it, the better. It does not make a principle untrue to print it, neither does it make it true not to print it.” As an example, Elder McConkie stated that the fifth Lecture on Faith, “in effect, is a creed announcing who Deity is. In my judgment, it is one of the most comprehensive, intelligent, inspired utterances that now exists in the English language—that exists in one place defining, interpreting, expounding, announcing, and testifying what kind of being God is.”<sup>27</sup> In the same vein, Doctrine and Covenants 20:17–35 represents a kind of creedal statement accompanying a lengthier discussion of Church government.

Latter-day Saints believe that the creeds spoken of in the First Vision were the post–New Testament creeds that sought to codify beliefs concerning God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and Their relationships—concepts that had evolved during the time following the deaths of the original Apostles. Stephen Robinson observed that there is an irony associated with traditional Christians’ condemnation of the Latter-day Saint addition to the canon of scripture. In reality, he suggests, Protestants do not hold strictly to a belief in *sola scriptura*. “When they accuse Mormons of not believing the Bible,” he wrote, “they usually mean that we do not believe interpretations formulated by post-biblical councils. If Evangelicals are going to insist on the doctrine of *sola scriptura* or *ad fontes* [‘to the sources’], then they ought to stop ascribing scriptural authority to postbiblical traditions.” Robinson elsewhere stated that “informed Latter-day Saints do not argue that historic Christianity lost *all* truth or became *completely* corrupt. The orthodox churches may have lost the ‘fullness’ of the gospel, but they did not lose all of it nor even most of it.



Many Evangelicals caricature or overstate the actual LDS view, which is that the orthodox churches are incomplete rather than corrupt. It is their postbiblical creeds that are identified in Joseph Smith’s first vision as an ‘abomination,’ but certainly not their individual members or their members’ *biblical* beliefs.”<sup>28</sup>

To the extent that creeds perpetuate falsehood, particularly concerning the nature of the Godhead, then of course our Father in Heaven would be displeased with them. To the extent that creeds divide people, categorize people, exclude people, and even lead others to persecute them, one can appreciate why they would be viewed as undesirable. To the extent that they become a badge of belonging, the identifying mark by which a “true Christian” is known, the only way by which one can understand what the scriptures really mean about God and Christ—to that extent the Christian circle is drawn smaller and smaller and the grace of God that makes salvation available to all humankind is frustrated (see Titus 2:11).

It seems to me that God and the Prophet Joseph were just as concerned with creedalism as they were with incorrect doctrine within the creeds. Two Christian writers have observed: “The early Church creeds were motivated more by political than theological concerns. As William Penn is credited with saying, ‘Persecution entered with creed-making.’ Like-mindedness became a requirement rather than a goal. Orthodoxy, not love and grace, became the central focus.” Further, “The saved were those Christians who shared our doctrinal creed. It wasn’t enough to claim you were Christian. You had to be the right kind of Christian, a faithful adherent of our religious code. Those within this tight circle were our brothers and sisters, and we were obliged to love them. Those outside our church, denomination, or religion were unsaved.”<sup>29</sup>

The Apostle Paul affirmed that our Savior “will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). This is what the Prophet Joseph had in mind when he stated in October 1843: “I cannot believe in any of the creeds of the different denominations, because they all have some things in them I cannot subscribe to, though all of them have some truth. I want to come up into the presence of God, and learn all things; but the creeds set up stakes, and say, ‘Hitherto shalt thou come, and no further’; which I cannot subscribe to.”<sup>30</sup>

The “professors” mentioned in the First Vision account seem to be the antagonistic ministers in Joseph Smith’s immediate neighborhood. After describing the response of a Methodist minister to his First Vision as “It was all of the devil, that there were no such things as visions or revelations in these days; that all such things had ceased with the apostles, and that there would never be any more of them,” Joseph reported, “I soon found, however, that my telling the story had excited a great deal of prejudice against me among *professors of religion*, and was the cause of great persecution, which continued to increase . . . and this was common among all the sects” (Joseph Smith—History 1:21–22; emphasis added). In his 1842 account of the First Vision, Joseph indicates that “they [the Father and the Son] told me that all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines, and that none of them was acknowledged of God as His Church and kingdom: and I was expressly commanded to ‘go not after them,’ at the same time receiving a promise that the fullness of the Gospel should at some future time be made known unto me.”<sup>31</sup>

Elder William Grant Bangerter once asked students and faculty at Brigham Young University, “Do we believe that all ministers of other churches are corrupt?” He then answered his own question:

Of course not. Joseph Smith certainly did not intend that. By reading the passage carefully, we find that the Lord Jesus Christ was referring to those ministers who were quarreling and arguing about which church was true—that is, the particular group with which Joseph Smith was involved. . . .

It is clearly apparent that there have been and now are many choice, honorable, and devoted men and women going in the direction of their eternal salvation who give righteous and conscientious leadership to their congregations in other churches. Joseph Smith evidently had many warm and friendly contacts with ministers of other religions. Quite a few of them joined the Church: Sidney Rigdon, John Taylor, Parley P. Pratt, and others in America and England. Some of them who carried the Christian attitude of tolerance did not join the Church. There are many others like them today.<sup>32</sup>

To state that those “professors were all corrupt” is to suggest that they and their teachings had become unsound, spoiled, tainted.<sup>33</sup> Further, as Richard Bushman pointed out:

At some level, Joseph’s revelations indicate a loss of trust in the Christian ministry. For all their learning and their eloquence, the clergy could not be trusted with the Bible. They did not understand what the book meant. It was a record of revelations, and the ministry had turned it into a handbook. The Bible had become a text to be interpreted rather than an experience to be lived. In the process, the power of the book was lost. . . . It was the power thereof that Joseph and the other visionaries of his time sought to recover. Not getting it from the ministry, they looked for it themselves.

To me that is Joseph Smith's significance for our time. He stood on the contested ground where the Enlightenment and Christianity confronted one another, and his life posed the question, Do you believe God speaks? Joseph was swept aside, of course, in the rush of ensuing intellectual battles and was disregarded by the champions of both great systems, but his mission was to hold out for the reality of divine revelation and establish one small outpost where that principle survived. Joseph's revelatory principle is not a single revelation serving for all time, as the Christians of his day believed regarding the incarnation of Christ, nor a mild sort of inspiration seeping into the minds of all good people, but specific, ongoing directions from God to his people. At a time when the origins of Christianity were under assault by the forces of Enlightenment rationality, Joseph Smith returned modern Christianity to its origins in revelation.<sup>34</sup>

### **The "More" of Mormonism**

It is a gross exaggeration and misrepresentation to suggest that Latter-day Saints believe that all of Christian practice and doctrine since the time of the original Apostles have been apostate. Noble and God-fearing men and women who lived through the period that too many have termed the "dark ages" sought to do good and maintain the tenets of Christianity to the best of their ability. Elder John Taylor declared that there were persons during medieval times who "could commune with God, and who, by the power of faith, could draw aside the curtain of eternity and gaze upon the invisible world . . . , have the ministering of angels, and unfold the future destinies of the world. If those were dark ages I pray God to give me a little

darkness, and deliver me from the light and intelligence that prevail in our day."<sup>35</sup>

President Brigham Young explained that many good men before the time of Joseph Smith enjoyed "the Spirit of revelation" and specifically noted that John Wesley was as good a man as lived on earth.<sup>36</sup> In speaking of the primitive church, President Boyd K. Packer observed that "the flame flickered and dimmed. . . . But always, as it had from the beginning, the Spirit of God inspired worthy souls. . . . We owe an immense debt to the protesters and the reformers who preserved the scriptures and translated them. They knew something had been lost. They kept the flame alive as best they could. Many of them were martyrs."<sup>37</sup> On another occasion he taught: "The line of priesthood authority was broken. But mankind was not left in total darkness or completely without revelation or inspiration. The idea that with the Crucifixion of Christ the heavens were closed and they opened in the First Vision is not true. The Light of Christ would be everywhere present to attend the children of God; the Holy Ghost would visit seeking souls. The prayers of the righteous would not go unanswered."<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Elder Dallin H. Oaks explained, "We are indebted to the men and women who kept the light of faith and learning alive through the centuries to the present day. We have only to contrast the lesser light that exists among peoples unfamiliar with the names of God and Jesus Christ to realize the great contribution made by Christian teachers through the ages. We honor them as servants of God."<sup>39</sup>

Elder Alexander B. Morrison has written: "The view that changes in the early church resulted in the descent of a blanket of stygian darkness over the entire earth such that humankind had no contact with God or the Spirit for nearly two millennia simply doesn't stand up to the scru-

tiny of modern scholarship. Scholars of today, benefiting from perspectives and information not readily available a century ago, understand that the ‘Dark Ages’ were not nearly so dark as previously had been thought.”<sup>40</sup>

The question that those from many other faiths ask is: Why should I join your church? What do you have to offer beyond my acceptance of Jesus Christ and the teachings of the Bible? President Brigham Young declared, “We, the Latter-day Saints, take the liberty of believing more than our Christian brethren: we not only believe . . . the Bible, but . . . the whole of the plan of salvation that Jesus has given to us. Do we differ from others who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? No, only in believing more.”<sup>41</sup> How so? What is the “more” of Mormonism?

1. *Restored divine authority.* As suggested earlier, one of the foundational teachings of Mormonism is that divine authority, known as the holy priesthood, was lost sometime following the deaths of the original Apostles. This authority, including its keys—the directing power, the right of presidency—was necessary anciently to perform saving ordinances or sacraments, to oversee the performance of such sacraments, to properly interpret and propagate sound doctrine, and to officiate in the business of the Church. The restoration of divine authority through Joseph Smith in 1829 was therefore necessary so the restored Church might be built upon the foundation of apostles and prophets, “Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone” (Ephesians 2:19–20).

2. *Doctrinal perspective.* Latter-day Saints believe that many of the truths restored through Joseph Smith provide a grander and more elevated perspective on life. For example, to believe that men and women existed before this mortal sphere has immense implications for life here—our joys, our friendships and associations, our likes and dis-

likes, and our challenges and suffering. Also, consider what difference it makes to believe in “Christ’s eternal gospel,” to possess the truth that the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ was revealed in the earliest ages of this world.

3. *Doctrinal consolation.* What difference does it make to know that God has a plan and a timetable by which all of His children will have the opportunity to either accept or reject the message of salvation in Christ? What difference does it make to know that the sweetest associations of this life—marriage and family—can continue uninterrupted beyond the veil of death? What difference does it make to know that those who were unable to be married in this life to one with similar passion for the faith will have that opportunity hereafter?

4. *Doctrinal clarification and expansion.* Just as traditional Christians have no hesitation in viewing the events and teachings of the Old Testament through the lenses of the New Testament, so Latter-day Saints do not hesitate to read the Bible through the lenses of the Book of Mormon, modern scripture, and the words of living apostles and prophets. Supplementation is not the same as contradiction. Insights beyond that which is taught in the Bible are available on such topics as the premortal existence of humankind (see Alma 13:1–5; Moses 4:1–4; Abraham 3:22–28); the purpose of the Fall and its link to the Atonement (see 2 Nephi 2; Moses 4–5); the breadth and scope of Christ’s infinite Atonement (see Alma 7:11–13; D&C 76:22–24; Moses 1:32–35); Christ’s ministry in the postmortal spirit world (see D&C 138); and the “many mansions” (John 14:2) or degrees of glory hereafter (see D&C 76; 131).

5. *Doctrinal confirmation.* One of the major purposes of the Book of Mormon and modern scripture is to convince people “that the records of the prophets and of the

twelve apostles of the Lamb are true” (1 Nephi 13:39). In the Book of Mormon, we find the following: “Therefore repent, and be baptized in the name of Jesus, and lay hold upon the gospel of Christ, which shall be set before you, not only in this record but also in the record which shall come unto the Gentiles from the Jews [the Bible]. . . . For behold, this [the Book of Mormon] is written for the intent that ye may believe that [the Bible]” (Mormon 7:8–9). In the Doctrine and Covenants, we read that the Book of Mormon has been delivered in the last days for the purpose of “proving to the world that the holy scriptures are true, and that God does inspire men and call them to his holy work in this age and generation, as well as in generations of old; thereby showing that he is the same God yesterday, today, and forever” (D&C 20:11–12). In a day when people worldwide have come to doubt the historicity of biblical events, teachings, and values—especially the redemptive role of Jesus the Christ—Latter-day Saint scripture stands as a second witness to their truthfulness and reality.

6. *Doctrinal consistency.* As indicated earlier, there is a great advantage to a priesthood hierarchy in terms of maintaining doctrinal orthodoxy. While members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are perfectly free to think, reflect, and draw doctrinal conclusions on their own, they are at the same time instructed to teach “none other things than that which the prophets and apostles [ancient and modern] have written” (D&C 52:9). The responsibility for declaration, clarification, and interpretation of doctrine for the Church as a whole rests with the presiding councils of the Church, the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The pattern is established in the Book of Mormon: “And it came to pass that Alma, having authority from God, ordained priests . . . to preach unto them, and to teach them concerning the things



pertaining to the kingdom of God. And he commanded them that they should teach nothing save it were the things which he had taught, and which had been spoken by the mouth of the holy prophets" (Mosiah 18:18–19).

Later the practicality of such a teaching philosophy is given: "Therefore they did assemble themselves together in different bodies, being called churches; every church having their priests and their teachers, and every priest preaching the word according as it was delivered to him by the mouth of Alma." Now note what follows: "And thus, notwithstanding there being many churches they were all one church, yea, even the church of God; for there was nothing preached in all the churches except it were repentance and faith in God" (Mosiah 25:21–22).

It was Paul who wrote that the organization of the Church—including apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers—had been put in place "for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive" (Ephesians 4:11–14).

## **Conclusion**

I have often been challenged by people who are offended by the Latter-day Saint belief in being the "only true church" or of our claim to possess the "fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ." They feel it is unkind, exclusionary, and unchristian. I hasten to add that the complete statement in the Doctrine and Covenants is that Latter-day Saints belong to "the only true and living church upon the face of

the whole earth, with which I, the Lord, am well pleased, *speaking unto the church collectively and not individually*” (D&C 1:30; emphasis added). Less than three years after those words were revealed, that same Lord chastened the Saints by observing that “were it not for the transgressions of my people, *speaking concerning the church and not individuals*, they might have been redeemed even now” (D&C 105:2; emphasis added).

On the other hand, doesn’t Church A believe they have a better insight into this or that doctrine than Churches B, C, and D? Doesn’t each denomination feel strongly that their beliefs and practices most closely mirror those of the Church established by Jesus in the first century? Weren’t Hus, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and Wesley convinced that their efforts to reform the mother church—to cease from the abuses of medieval Catholicism and to return to the scriptures—were inspired and heaven-directed, that their reforms and teachings brought them closer to what the Master had intended from the beginning?

If I were asked, “Is God a Latter-day Saint?” I would probably respond something like this: Our God is the God of all creation, an infinite, eternal, and omni-loving Being who will do all that He can to lead and direct, to bring greater light into the lives of His children, to save as many as will be saved. He is the only true God and thus the only Deity who can hear and respond to the earnest petitions of His children. He is the God of the Catholics, the Protestants, the Buddhists, the Hindus, and all those who seek to know and love and offer praise and adoration to the true and living God. I have been a Latter-day Saint all my life, but I do not in any way believe the Almighty loves Latter-day Saints any more than He loves Anglicans, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Unitarians, Jews, or Muslims. He loves us all and is pleased with any and every halting effort

on our part to learn of Him, serve Him, and be true to the light within us.

"If it has been demonstrated that I have been willing to die for a 'Mormon,'" Joseph Smith taught, "I am bold to declare before Heaven that I am just as ready to die in defending the rights of a Presbyterian, a Baptist, or a good man of any other denomination; for the same principle which would trample upon the rights of the Latter-day Saints would trample upon the rights of the Roman Catholics, or of any other denomination who may be unpopular and too weak to defend themselves."<sup>42</sup> On another occasion he declared: "If I esteem mankind to be in error shall I bear them down? No. I will lift them up, and in their own way too, if I cannot persuade them my way is better; and I will not seek to compel any man to believe as I do, only by the force of reasoning, for truth will cut its own way. Do you believe in Jesus Christ and the Gospel of salvation which he revealed? So do I. Christians should cease wrangling and contending with each other, and cultivate the principles of union and friendship in their midst."<sup>43</sup>

Latter-day Saints cannot jettison what they believe to be the language of the Lord to Joseph Smith in 1820 in order to allay bad feelings or to court favor. We hold to the truth that God has spoken anew in our day and restored His everlasting gospel through living prophets.<sup>44</sup> This is our distinctive position, our contribution to a world that desperately needs a belief in God, an understanding of His grand plan of salvation, the promise and hope that come from a Redeemer, and confirming evidence for the historical veracity of the Holy Bible. We can seek, as I have sought to do in this paper, to better understand what was meant and intended, but we cannot relinquish our reason for being. President Gordon B. Hinckley remarked: "The Lord said that this is the only true and living Church upon the

face of the earth with which He is well-pleased. I didn't say that. Those are His words. The Prophet Joseph was told that the other sects were wrong. Those are not my words. Those are the Lord's words. But they are hard words for those of other faiths. We don't need to exploit them. We just need to be kind and good and gracious people to others, showing by our example the great truth of that which we believe."<sup>45</sup>

Joseph Smith solemnly noted, "While one portion of the human race is judging and condemning the other without mercy, the Great Parent of the universe looks upon the whole of the human family with a fatherly care and paternal regard; He views them as His offspring, and without any of those contracted feelings that influence the children of men, causes 'His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.' He holds the reins of judgment in His hands; He is a wise Lawgiver, and will judge all men, not according to the narrow, contracted notions of men, but 'according to the deeds done in the body whether they be good or evil' . . . We need not doubt the wisdom and intelligence of the Great Jehovah."<sup>46</sup>

## Notes

1. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 313.
2. Smith, *Teachings*, 316.
3. George Albert Smith, *Sharing the Gospel with Others*, comp. Preston Nibley (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1948), 12–13.
4. See also Smith, *Teachings*, 9–11, 61, 327.
5. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrines of the Restoration: Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie*, ed. Mark L. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 280.

6. George Q. Cannon, *Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon*, ed. Jerreld L. Newquist (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 472.

7. McConkie, *Doctrines of the Restoration*, 237.

8. 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), 5:340.

9. Ezra Taft Benson, in Conference Report, April 1972, 49; or *Ensign*, July 1972, 60.

10. B. H. Roberts, in Conference Report, April 1906, 14–15.

11. See Kent P. Jackson, “Am I a Christian?” in *FARMS Review of Books* 14, no. 1 (2002), 131–37.

12. See Ezra Taft Benson, in Conference Report, October 1985, 4–6; or *Ensign*, November 1985, 5–6.

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

14. See Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Prophets and Prophecy* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 174–75; see also Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (reprint San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1985), s.v. “true”; *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. Lesley Brown (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), s.v. “true”; John Ayto, *Dictionary of Word Origins* (New York: Arcade, 1990), s.v. “true.”

15. Maxwell, *Things As They Really Are*, 46; emphasis in original. The “two tests” recorded in 3 Nephi 27:8 are that the church must be called in Jesus’s name and must be “built upon [His] gospel.”

16. See, for example, Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002); Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002); John G. Stackhouse Jr., *Evangelical Landscapes: Facing Critical Issues of the Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002); Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001); Bruce Wilkinson, *A Life God*

*Rewards: Why Everything You Do Today Matters Forever* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2002); Joe L. Wall, *Going for the Gold: Reward and Loss at the Judgment of Believers* (Chicago: Moody, 1991).

17. John F. MacArthur, *Why One Way? Defending an Exclusive Claim in an Inclusive World* (Nashville: W Publishing, 2002), 61.

18. MacArthur, *Why One Way?*, 24.

19. C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections* (London: Fount/Harper Collins, 1981), 100.

20. Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 24.

21. Joseph Smith explained: “Upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.’ What rock? Revelation” (*Teachings*, 274).

22. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 174.

23. Webster, *American Dictionary*, s.v. “creed.”

24. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “creed.”

25. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 1–2, 4.

26. Milton V. Backman Jr., *Christian Churches in America: Origins and Beliefs*, rev. ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1983), 159.

27. Bruce R. McConkie, “The Lord God of Joseph Smith,” discourse delivered January 4, 1972, *Speeches of the Year* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1972), 4.

28. Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 72, 61; emphasis in original.

29. Philip Gulley and James Mulholland, *If God Is Love: Rediscovering Grace in an Ungracious World* (San Francisco: Harper, 2004), 56, 61.

30. Smith, *Teachings*, 327. One can gain a deeper insight into the Prophet’s frustration and pain concerning the negative impact of

religious creeds in his letter to the Saints from Liberty Jail (see D&C 123:7).

31. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:536. See also similar accounts of the First Vision published by Orson Pratt and Orson Hyde in Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: Confirming Evidences and Contemporary Accounts*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 172, 175.

32. William Grant Bangerter, “It’s a Two-Way Street,” address delivered on August 4, 1985, in *1984–85 BYU Speeches of the Year* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Publications, 1985), 161.

33. See Webster, *An American Dictionary*, s.v. “corrupt.”

34. Richard L. Bushman, “A Joseph Smith for the Twenty-First Century,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 40, no. 3 (2001), 167–68; see also Richard L. Bushman, *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 274.

35. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 16:197.

36. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:5; see also 6:170; 11:126.

37. Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, April 2000, 7; or *Ensign*, May 2000, 8.

38. Boyd K. Packer, “The Light of Christ,” *Ensign*, April 2005, 11.

39. Dallin H. Oaks, in Conference Report, April 1995, 113; or *Ensign*, May 1995, 85.

40. Alexander B. Morrison, *Turning from Truth: A New Look at the Great Apostasy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 2.

41. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 13:56.

42. Smith, *Teachings*, 313.

43. Smith, *Teachings*, 313–14.

44. See Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, October 1985, 104–7; or *Ensign*, November 1985, 80–82.

45. Gordon B. Hinckley, in *Ensign*, June 2004, 3.

46. Smith, *Teachings*, 218.

