

A DIFFERENT JESUS? THE CHRIST OF THE RESTORATION

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As we celebrate the name, person, power, and infinite influence of Jesus the Christ, let us consider what it means to be a Christian, and, in particular, a Latter-day Saint Christian. There are few questions more relevant in our day than "What think ye of Christ?"

A SOBERING CHALLENGE

Several years ago, two colleagues and I met with three representatives of the Southern Baptist Convention. They were making preparations for a major conference to be held in Salt Lake City and wanted to meet with members of the religion faculty at Brigham Young University. The meeting, which was held in my office, lasted about two hours. It began quite peacefully, as we exchanged information about where we had lived, gone to school, been employed, et cetera.

During the second hour, our gathering became more animated as we turned our attention to doctrine. The leader of

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the group asked questions about such matters as the Fall, the Atonement, grace and works, temples, kingdoms of glory, the need for Joseph Smith and prophets, and the scriptural canon. Much of our discussion centered on what it means to be saved. One member of their group commented to us that the problem with Latter-day Saints was that we did not really accept the Bible but tended to view all things through the lenses of Joseph Smith and the Restoration. We indicated that we respected and even revered the Bible, but we did agree that much of what we know about God and His plan had come to us through the Restoration. We added that traditional Christianity tended to view all things through the lenses of the early Christian Church councils and the resultant creedal statements.

At that point, one of our visitors spoke out in a rather harsh tone: "Why don't you people just admit it—you worship a different Jesus!" My colleagues and I spent the next half hour or so trying to convince them of our acceptance of Jesus of Nazareth as set forth in the New Testament. We left that meeting somewhat frustrated, sensing that we had somehow failed to provide an adequate convincing witness of the Latter-day Saint perspective on Jesus Christ.

I have asked myself in deep earnestness, Do we worship the same Jesus worshiped by our Roman Catholic or Evangelical Protestant friends? This question is not answered quickly or easily. It strikes at the heart of who we really are and what we really believe. Because I do not speak as a general officer of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, my answer is based on what I have come to know about Jesus Christ from my own prayerful study.

WHAT DO WE BELIEVE ABOUT JESUS CHRIST?

Latter-day Saints claim to be Christians on the basis of our doctrine, our defined relationship to Christ, our patterns of

worship, and our way of life. We resonate with C. S. Lewis's words: "It is not for us to say who, in the deepest sense, is or is not close to the spirit of Christ. We do not see into men's hearts. We cannot judge, and are indeed forbidden to judge. It would be wicked arrogance for us to say that any man is, or is not, a Christian in this refined sense. . . . When a man who accepts the Christian doctrine lives unworthily of it, it is much clearer to say he is a bad Christian than to say he is not a Christian."¹ What do we believe about Christ? I would submit that Latter-day Saints believe the following:

1. We believe Jesus is the Son of God, the Only Begotten Son in the flesh. We accept the prophetic declarations in the Old Testament that refer directly and powerfully to the coming of the Messiah, the Savior of all humankind. We believe that Jesus of Nazareth was and is the fulfillment of those prophecies. He is the Prophet "like unto Moses," the "suffering servant" of Isaiah, the Second David of Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

2. We believe the accounts of Jesus' life and ministry recorded in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in the New Testament to be historical and thus truthful. For us, the Jesus of history is indeed the Christ of faith. While we do not believe the Bible to be inerrant, complete, or the final word of God, we accept the essential details of the Gospels and more particularly the divine witness of those men who walked and talked with Him or were mentored by His chosen Apostles.

3. We believe that He was born of a virgin, Mary, in Bethlehem of Judea in what has come to be known as the meridian of time, the central point in salvation history. From His mother, Mary, Jesus inherited mortality, the capacity to feel the frustrations and ills of this world, including the

1. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 10–11.

capacity to die. We believe that Jesus was fully human in that He was subject to sickness, to pain, and to temptation.

4. We believe Jesus is the Son of God the Father and as such inherited powers of godhood and divinity from His Father, including immortality, the capacity to live forever. Furthermore, we believe Jesus can extend those same attributes and powers to others. While He walked the dusty roads of Palestine as a man, He possessed the powers of a God and ministered as one having authority and heaven-sent power, including power over the elements and even power over life and death.

5. We believe Jesus performed miracles, including granting sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, life to those who had died, and forgiveness to those steeped in sin. We believe the New Testament accounts of healings and miracles of nature and the cleansing of human souls to be authentic and real.

6. We believe Jesus taught His gospel—the glad tidings or good news that salvation had come to earth through Him—in order that people might more clearly understand both their relationship to God the Father and their responsibility to each other.

7. We believe Jesus selected leaders, invested them with authority, and organized a church. We maintain that the Church of Jesus Christ was established, as the Apostle Paul later wrote, for the perfection and unity of the Saints (see Ephesians 4:11–14).

8. We believe that Jesus' teachings and His own matchless and perfect life provide a pattern for men and women to live by and that we must emulate that pattern as best we can to find true happiness and fulfillment in this life. He did not just point the way; He is the way. He did not just teach the truth; He is the truth. He did not just bring resurrection and life to

men and women; He is the resurrection and the life (see John 14:6).

9. We believe that Jesus understood clearly who He was and that He made it sufficiently clear to many others. He knew that He was Jehovah, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He knew that He was God's Only Begotten Son. He knew that people could draw close to God and gain happiness and joy in this life and eternal life in the world to come only through an acceptance of His teachings and His willing sacrifice.

10. We believe Jesus suffered in the Garden of Gethsemane and that He submitted to a cruel death on the cross of Calvary, all as a willing sacrifice, a substitutionary atonement for our sins. That offering is made efficacious as we exercise faith and trust in Him; repent of our sins; are baptized by immersion as a symbol of our acceptance of His death, burial, and rise to newness of life; and receive the gift of the Holy Ghost (see Acts 2:37-38; 3 Nephi 27:19-20). While none of us can comprehend how and in what manner one person can take upon himself the effects of the sins of another—or, even more mysteriously, the sins of all men and women—we accept and glory in the transcendent reality that Christ remitted our sins through His suffering. We know it is true because we have experienced it personally. Further, we believe that He died, was buried, and rose from the dead and that His resurrection was a physical reality. As the "first fruits" of the Resurrection, we believe that the effects of His rise from the tomb pass upon all men and women. "As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22).

11. We do not believe that we can either overcome the flesh or gain eternal reward through our own unaided efforts. We must work to our limit and then rely upon the merits, mercy, and grace of the Holy One of Israel to see us through

the struggles of life and into life eternal (see 2 Nephi 31:19; Moroni 6:4). We believe that while human works are necessary—including exercising faith in Christ, repenting of our sins, receiving the ordinances of salvation, and rendering Christian service to our neighbors—they are not sufficient for salvation (see 2 Nephi 25:23; Moroni 10:32).

12. We believe that our discipleship ought to be evident in the way we live our lives, that those who have come unto Christ by covenant should manifest the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22–25; see Alma 7:23–24). As James taught, true faith always manifests itself in faithfulness to the Lord and His word (see James 2:17–20). Christian discipleship consists in continuing in His word (see John 8:31–32) through obedience to His commandments (see Matthew 7:21).

In essence, we declare that Jesus Christ is the head of our Church and the central figure in our theology. President Gordon B. Hinckley asked, “Are we Christians? Of course we are! No one can honestly deny that. We may be somewhat different from the traditional pattern of Christianity. But no one believes more literally in the redemption wrought by the Lord Jesus Christ. No one believes more fundamentally that He was the Son of God, that He died for the sins of mankind, that He rose from the grave, and that He is the living resurrected Son of the living Father.

“All of our doctrine, all of our religious practice stems from that one basic doctrinal position: ‘We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.’ This is the first article of our faith, and all else flows therefrom.”²

2. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Excerpts from Recent Addresses of President Gordon B. Hinckley,” *Ensign*, February 1998, 73.

HOW ARE WE DIFFERENT?

We do not accept the Christ that emerges from centuries of debates and councils and creeds. Over the years that followed the death and resurrection of the Lord, Christians sought to "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 1:3). We believe that the epistles of Paul, Peter, Jude, and John suggest that the apostasy of the Christian Church was well under way by the close of the first century. With the deaths of the Apostles and the loss of the priesthood and its keys, the institutional power to perform saving ordinances, learn the mind of God, and interpret scripture was no longer on earth. To be sure, there were noble men and women throughout the earth during the centuries that followed, religious persons of goodwill, learned men who sought to hold the Church together and to preserve holy writ. But we believe that these acted without prophetic authority.

In an effort to satisfy the accusations of Jews who denounced the notion of three Gods (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost) as polytheistic, and at the same time incorporate ancient but appealing Greek philosophical concepts of an all-powerful moving force in the universe, the Christian Church began to redefine the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. One classic work describes the intersection of Christian theology and Greek philosophy: "It is impossible for any one, whether he be a student of history or no, to fail to notice a difference of both form and content between the Sermon on the Mount and the Nicene Creed. . . . The one belongs to a world of Syrian peasants, the other to a world of Greek philosophers. . . . The religion which our Lord preached . . . took the Jewish conception of a Father in heaven, and gave it a new meaning." In short,

3. Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith Publishers, 1970), 1, 4-5.

"Greek Christianity of the fourth century was rooted in Hellenism. The Greek minds which had been ripening for Christianity had absorbed new ideas and new motives."³

Decades and even centuries of debate as to the nature of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit took place at Nicaea (A.D. 325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451). These resulted in creedal statements that became the walk and talk of Christian doctrine. Men sought to harmonize revealed doctrine with Greek philosophy, which resulted in the corruption of fundamental and foundational truths, such as the distinct and separate personages and natures of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.⁴ That the early Christians sought to hold on to the biblical view of God's corporeality, for example, is apparent. Celsus, the noted anti-Christian writer of the second century, stated: "The Christians say that God has hands, a mouth, and a voice; they are always proclaiming that 'God said this' or 'God spoke.' 'The heavens declare the work of his hands,' they say. I can only comment that such a God is no god at all, for *God has neither hands, mouth, nor voice, nor any characteristics of which we know.* And they say that God made man in his own image, failing to realize that God is not at all like a man, nor vice versa; *God resembles no form known to us.* . . . We know that God is without shape, without color. They say that God moved above the waters he created—but *we know that it is contrary to the nature of God to move.* Their absurd doctrines even contain reference to God walking about in the garden he created for man; and they speak of him being angry, jealous, moved to repentance, sorry, sleepy—in short, as being in every respect more a man than a God. *They have not read*

4. See Dallin H. Oaks, Conference Report, April 1995, 112–13.

5. Celsus, *On the True Doctrine*, in Joseph F. McConkie, *Sons and Daughters of God* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994), 108–9; emphasis added.

Plato, who teaches us in the *Republic* that God (the Good) does not even participate in being."⁶

Latter-day Saints reject the doctrine of the Trinity because we believe it is unscriptural. We do not feel it can be supported either from the Old or New Testaments, and we believe it runs counter to additional scriptural records we have received through modern prophets (see D&C 130:22-23). We forthrightly admit that our strongest arguments for the correctness of our views on the Godhead are from these additional scriptural records. We feel the doctrine of the Trinity represents a superimposition of Hellenistic philosophy on the Bible and that the simplest and clearest reading of the four Gospels sets forth a Godhead of three distinct beings and three Gods—not three coequal persons in one substance or essence.

It is not difficult to find non-Latter-day Saint biblical scholars who agree that the Trinity is unbiblical. One scholar observed: "There is no formal doctrine of the Trinity in the New Testament writers, if this means an explicit teaching that in one God there are three co-equal divine persons."⁷ Further, "The word [Trinity] does not occur in the Bible. It is generally acknowledged that the church father Tertullian (ca. A.D. 145-220) either coined the term or was the first to use it with reference to God. . . . The formal doctrine of the Trinity as it was defined by the great church councils of the fourth and fifth centuries is not to be found in the N[ew] T[estament]."⁸ In short, Latter-day Saints believe that the simplest reading of the New Testament text produces the simplest conclusion—that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are separate and

6. Edward J. Fortman, *The Trine God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 32; in Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 74.

7. Paul J. Achtemeier, ed., *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 1098-99.

distinct personages, that they are one in purpose, one in mind, one in glory, but separate in person. We feel that the sheer preponderance of references in the Bible would lead an uninformed reader—one unaffected by either the conclusions of the creeds (Protestant and Catholic positions) or insights from latter-day revelation (Latter-day Saint position)—to the understanding that God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost are separate beings. That is, one must look to the third- and fourth-century Christian Church, not to the New Testament itself, to make a strong case for the Trinity.

GLAD TIDINGS IN THE LAST DAYS

What, then, can the Latter-day Saints contribute to the world's understanding of Jesus Christ? What can we say that will make a difference in how men and women view and relate to the Savior? Who is the Christ of the Restoration?

THE FIRST VISION

Joseph Smith's First Vision represents the beginning of the revelation of God in our day. It is also, therefore, the beginning of the revelation of Jesus Christ. President Hinckley has observed: "To me it is a significant and marvelous thing that in establishing and opening this dispensation our Father did so with a revelation of himself and of his Son Jesus Christ, as if to say to all the world that he was weary of the attempts of men, earnest though these attempts might have been, to define and describe him. . . . The experience of Joseph Smith in a few moments in the grove on a spring day in 1820, brought more light and knowledge and understanding of the personality and reality and substance of God and his Beloved Son than men had arrived at during centuries of speculation."⁸

8. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 236.

By revelation Joseph Smith came to know that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost constitute the Godhead. From the beginning, the Prophet Joseph taught that the members of the Godhead are one in purpose, one in mind, one in glory, one in attributes and powers, but separate persons.⁹

There was reaffirmed in the First Vision the fundamental Christian teaching—that Jesus of Nazareth lived, died, was buried, and rose from the tomb in glorious immortality. In the midst of that light that shone above the brightness of the sun stood the resurrected Lord Jesus in company with His Father, the Almighty Elohim. Joseph Smith knew from the time of the First Vision that death was not the end, that life continues after one's physical demise, that another realm of existence—a postmortal sphere—does in fact exist.

THE BOOK OF MORMON

Through the Book of Mormon, translated by Joseph Smith, come additional insights concerning the person and powers of Jesus the Christ. We learn that He is the Holy One of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (see 1 Nephi 19:10), and that through an act of infinite condescension He left His throne divine and took a mortal body (see 1 Nephi 11; Mosiah 3:5). We learn from the teachings of Book of Mormon prophets that He was a man, but much more than man (see Mosiah 3:7, 9; Alma 34:11), that He had within Him the powers of the Father, the powers of the Spirit (see 2 Nephi 2:8; Helaman 5:11), the power to lay down His life and the power to take it up again.

Abinadi delivered a poignant and profound truth when he testified—as a prophetic commentary on Isaiah 53—that Jesus

9. See Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 370.

would be known as both Father and Son and that within Him the flesh and the Spirit, the Son and the Father, the man and the God would be blended wondrously (see Mosiah 15:1-4). Abinadi's teachings are not trinitarian, as some have suggested, but rather represent the resolution of the dilemma of the ages—how the Messiah could be both suffering servant and conquering king. An angel affirmed to King Benjamin that Christ would "suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death; for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and the abominations of his people" (Mosiah 3:7; compare Luke 22:44). Alma contributed the unfathomable doctrine that the Redeemer would not only suffer for our sins but that His descent below all things would include His suffering for our pains, our sicknesses, and our infirmities, thus allowing Him perfect empathy—"that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities" (Alma 7:11-12). Truly, the Book of Mormon prophets bear repeated witness that the atonement of Christ is infinite and eternal in scope (see 2 Nephi 9:7; 25:16; Alma 34:11-12).

It is to the Book of Mormon that we turn to receive the balanced perspective on the mercy and grace of an infinite Savior on the one hand, and the labors and works of finite man on the other. For example, one could come away from a careful reading of the second half of the New Testament somewhat confused on the matter of grace and works, finding those places where Paul seems almost to defy any notion of works as a means of salvation (see Romans 4:1-5; 10:1-4; Ephesians 2:8-10), but also those places where good works are clearly mentioned as imperative (see Romans 2:6; James 2:14-20; Revelation 20:12-13).

The Book of Mormon is a book about merit, but not about the merits of man. Indeed, as Aaron taught, "since man had fallen he could not merit anything of himself; but the sufferings and death of Christ atone for their sins, through faith and repentance, and so forth" (Alma 22:14). The doctrinal refrain is that "there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah" (2 Nephi 2:8). In the Book of Mormon, saving faith is that confidence in and complete reliance upon "the merits of him who is mighty to save" (2 Nephi 31:19; compare Moroni 6:4).

The sobering realization that none of us can make it alone is balanced by a consistent statement that the works of men and women, including the receipt of the ordinances of salvation, the performance of duty, and Christian acts of service—in short, being true to our part of the gospel covenant—though insufficient for salvation, are necessary. The Nephite prophets declared over and over that the day would come when people would be judged of their works, the works done "in their days of probation" (1 Nephi 15:32; see 2 Nephi 9:44). That is, "all men shall reap a reward of their works, according to that which they have been—if they have been righteous they shall reap the salvation of their souls, according to the power and deliverance of Jesus Christ; and if they have been evil they shall reap the damnation of their souls, according to the power and captivation of the devil" (Alma 9:28). In summary, we are saved by the grace of Christ "after all we can do" (2 Nephi 25:23), meaning above and beyond all we can do. As we come unto Christ by covenant, deny ourselves of ungodliness, and love God with all our souls, His grace—His divine enabling power, not only to be saved in the ultimate sense but also to face the challenges of each day—is then sufficient for us (see Moroni 10:32).

The Book of Mormon has a high Christology; that is, the doctrine of Christ is thick and heavy on the pages of this scriptural record, and the testimony of the divinity of the Lord and Savior is powerful and direct. One cannot read the Book of Mormon and honestly come away wondering what the Latter-day Saints believe about the divine Sonship. This New Covenant establishes clearly that "Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself to all nations" (title page; see also 2 Nephi 26:12).

THE COSMIC CHRIST

At the heart of the doctrine restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith is the doctrine of Christ. "The fundamental principles of our religion," the modern seer once observed, "are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it."¹⁰ The reality is that Adam fell, and we are subject to the effects of that fall. The glorious news, the glad tidings is that Christ our Lord has come to earth, offered Himself as a ransom for sin, and made available deliverance from death and hell and endless torment. We rejoice in the message of redemption that fell from the lips of Old and New Testament prophets. More especially, we exult in the realization that knowledge and truth and light and understanding concerning Jesus Christ—who He was, who He is, and what marvels have come to pass through Him—have been delivered to the Latter-day Saints through additional scriptural records and modern prophetic utterances. Like Jacob, we thrill in the mercy, wisdom, goodness, and greatness of the Holy One of Israel (see 2 Nephi 9:6–13).

10. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 121.

By means of the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible, the clarifying certitude that comes from prophetic lips, and through the power of the Holy Ghost, Latter-day Saints are enabled to know their Lord. Primarily through latter-day revelation, in conjunction with the Bible, we testify of the Cosmic Christ, of the Lord and Savior whose name-titles are myriad and whose roles are many. We shall now set forth a few of those roles.

1. *The Firstborn.* Modern revelation attests that Jesus was the firstborn spirit child of God the Father and thus the recipient of the birthright of the royal family. As such, and in that premortal realm, he was the Elder Brother of all of the spirit sons and daughters of the Father. "I was in the beginning with the Father," our Lord affirms in a modern revelation, "and am the Firstborn; and all those who are begotten through me are partakers of the glory of the same, and are the church of the Firstborn" (D&C 93:21-22).

2. *Jehovah—the Great I AM.* The man Jesus was and is the Almighty Jehovah, He who was, He who is, He who will forevermore be. He is who He is, the self-existing One, He who causes to be, He who brings into existence. As Jehovah, he became the chief advocate and proponent of the plan of the Eternal Father, the one who said, "Thy will be done" (Moses 4:2). He it was who volunteered to put into full effect all of the terms and conditions of that majestic plan. It was Jehovah who manifested himself to Adam and Eve after the Fall, who revealed himself to Enoch (see Moses 7:53) and Noah (see Moses 8:19), who made known the plan of life and salvation to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all of the faithful in the Old Testament (see 1 Nephi 19:10). It was Jehovah who gave the law of Moses to ancient Israel (see 3 Nephi 15:5), who spoke to the brother of Jared (see Ether 3) and directed

the Jaredites, who led the Lehites to a land of promise, and who prompted and empowered Jacob, Benjamin, Abinadi, Alma, and Samuel.

3. *The Creator.* As a spirit, Jehovah grew in knowledge and power to the point where He became "like unto God" (Abraham 3:24). Under the direction of the Father, and in company with "the noble and great ones" (3:22), He created this world and all things on the face of it (see 3:23-24; 4:1). In addition, He became the Creator of worlds without number (see D&C 76:24; Moses 1:33; 7:30). As "the Lord Omnipotent," He came to be known to the ancients as "the Father of heaven and earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning" (Mosiah 3:5, 8). To the Nephites, He declared: "Behold, I am Jesus Christ the Son of God. I created the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them are. I was with the Father from the beginning" (3 Nephi 9:15).

4. *The Promised Messiah.* Through his inspired translation of Genesis, a portion of which we now have as the book of Moses, the Prophet Joseph learned that our first parents were commanded to offer the firstlings of their flocks as an offering unto the Lord. Adam and Eve were obedient and were taught by an angel that animal sacrifice was "a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father. . . . Wherefore," the angel instructed, "thou shalt do all that thou doest in the name of the Son, and thou shalt repent and call upon God in the name of the Son forevermore" (Moses 5:5-8). And so it was that from the dawn of time on this globe, men and women looked forward with an eye of faith to that "great and last sacrifice" (Alma 34:13) that opened the door to redemption. Jehovah would come to earth as the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Christ. From Adam to Zechariah and from Zenos to Abinadi, the prophets of old spoke of the coming of the Holy One of Israel, the Lamb slain from the foundation of the

world. Truly, as Jacob the Lehighite declared, "None of the prophets have written, nor prophesied, save they have spoken concerning this Christ" (Jacob 7:11).

5. *The Only Begotten in the Flesh.* Modern revelation certifies that Jesus of Nazareth is literally the Son of God, the Only Begotten of the Father in the flesh. He is not the Son of the Holy Ghost, nor is He the Son of the Father in some mystical, metaphorical sense; He is the Son of Almighty God. Indeed, He is the Son of Man, meaning the Son of Man of Holiness (see Moses 6:57). Truly, as Helaman taught, "He hath power given unto him from the Father to redeem them from their sins because of repentance" (Helaman 5:11). John the Baptist testified: "And I, John, bear record that I beheld his glory, as the glory of the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth, even the Spirit of truth, which came and dwelt in the flesh, and dwelt among us" (D&C 93:11).

6. *The Father and the Son.* Though it is true that the word *Father* is used in regard to Elohim as the Father of our spirits, the scriptures and inspired oracles of this dispensation attest that Jesus is also known as the Father—Father as Creator of the heavens and the earth (see Alma 11:39), Father through spiritual renewal and rebirth (see Mosiah 5:7; D&C 25:1), and Father by divine investiture of authority. That is, our Savior, as the Word of the Father and the messenger of salvation (see D&C 93:8), is authorized and appointed to act and speak on behalf of the Father, in the first person for the Father, as though He were the Father.

7. *The Perfect One.* The revelations of the Restoration confirm and clarify the biblical truth that Jesus of Nazareth was and is the only mortal to traverse earth's paths without committing sin. The Prophet Joseph taught that Jesus "kept the law of God and remained without sin, showing thereby that it is in the power of man to keep the law and remain also

without sin. And also that by him a righteous judgment might come upon all flesh, that all who walk not in the law of God may justly be condemned by the law and have no excuse for their sins."¹¹ Jesus never took a backward step and therefore never forfeited the right to the influence of His Father's Spirit. "Where is the man that is free from vanity?" Joseph Smith asked. "None ever were perfect but Jesus; and why was He perfect? Because He was the Son of God, and had the fulness of the Spirit, and greater power than any man."¹² The Savior was and is the Holy One of Israel, the only being in eternity who owed no debt to divine justice and could thereby "claim of the Father his rights of mercy which he hath upon the children of men" (Moroni 7:27).

8. *Gracious Savior*. As early as the spring of 1820 in that glorious theophany we call the First Vision, the boy prophet was instructed by the Savior: "Joseph, my son, thy sins are forgiven thee. Go thy way, walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments. Behold, I am the Lord of glory. I was crucified for the world that all those who believe on my name may have eternal life."¹³ Thus, among the first truths imparted in this final dispensation was the central verity that salvation is in Christ and that redemption and remission of sins come in no other way. While the theologians of Joseph Smith's day pursued the quest for "the historical Jesus" (a quest that continues in our own time), the prophet of the Restoration saved us the quest; he affirmed repeatedly and consistently that Jesus of Nazareth was and is Christ the Lord, thereby "proving

11. Joseph Smith, *Lectures on Faith*, 5:2, in Larry E. Dahl and Charles D. Tate Jr., eds., *The Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1990), 83-84.

12. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 187-88; compare JST, John 3:34.

13. From 1832 account, in Milton V. Backman Jr., *Joseph Smith's First Vision* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 157; spelling and punctuation standardized.

to the world that the holy scriptures are true" (D&C 20:11). The Saints of God are thus called upon to "believe the gospel and rely upon the merits of Jesus Christ, and be glorified through faith in his name" (D&C 3:20).

9. *The Deliverer among the Disembodied.* That the Redeemer's mission spanned the veil of death and continued after His own decease is taught in the Holy Bible, though not with unmistakable clarity (see John 5:25-29; 1 Peter 3:18-20; 4:6). Through Isaiah, the Lord Jehovah proclaimed: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and opening of the prison to them that are bound" (Isaiah 61:1). That Jesus was indeed the realization of this prophecy is clear from his own self-testimony (see Luke 4:18-19).

In a sermon on 12 May 1844, Joseph Smith taught: "Those who will not obey the gospel will go to the world of spirits, there to stay till they have paid the utmost farthing or till some person pays their debts they owe. Now all those [who] die in the faith go to the prison of spirits to preach to the dead in body, but they are alive in the spirit." Another account of this sermon is as follows: "The sectarians have no charity for me, but I have for them. I intend to send men to prison to preach to them."¹⁴ It remained, of course, for President Joseph F. Smith to announce additional clarifying truths to the world concerning the work of the redemption of the dead (see D&C 138).

10. *The King of kings and Lord of lords.* We know from modern revelation that Jesus of Nazareth was and is the Christ, the

14. Andrew Ehat and Lyndon Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 370-71; spelling and punctuation standardized.

Holy One of Israel. We know that He came to earth to teach, to cleanse and sanctify human hearts, and to die and rise from the tomb. In addition, He came to earth as a legal administrator, empowered to empower others. He ordained and set apart and bestowed priesthoods and authorities, and He thereby established His church and kingdom on earth. That Church of Jesus Christ fell away after the death of the Apostles, and the keys of authority were lost to the world for almost two millennia. The call of Joseph Smith signaled not only a restoration of divine truths but also a restoration of the powers necessary to reestablish the kingdom of God on earth, this time to remain forever. The glorious Restoration, begun in the spring of 1820, will continue into and through the Millennium. Jesus the Christ will then, in that magnificent day of peace and glory, reign as the Second David, the King of Israel and of all the earth, the King of kings. And this earth will be His. Therefore, "call upon the Lord, that his kingdom may go forth upon the earth, that the inhabitants thereof may receive it, and be prepared for the days to come, in the which the Son of Man shall come down in heaven, clothed in the brightness of his glory, to meet the kingdom of God which is set up on the earth. Wherefore, may the kingdom of God go forth, that the kingdom of heaven may come" (D&C 65:5-6).

Through open vision, by visitations, and through the translation of ancient records, Joseph Smith came to know his Lord as few men have ever known him. The revelations that came to and through Joseph Smith made him acquainted with the mind and voice and will of the Master. Joseph came to know firsthand how to commune with Jehovah. President Joseph F. Smith, nephew of the Prophet, declared: "I believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ, because more than ever *I come nearer the possession of the actual knowledge that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, through the testimony of Joseph Smith . . .*

that he saw Him, that he heard Him, that he received instructions from Him, that he obeyed those instructions, and that *he today stands before the world as the last great, actual, living, witness of the divinity of Christ's mission and [Christ's] power to redeem man*. . . . Thank God for Joseph Smith.¹⁵

"HIM DECLARE I UNTO YOU" (ACTS 17:23)

One of the main reasons Latter-day Saints are often relegated to the category of cult or non-Christian is because we believe in scripture beyond the Bible. To be sure, we love the Bible. We cherish its sacred teachings and delight in reading and teaching it. We seek to conform our lives to its marvelous precepts. But we do not believe that the Bible contains all that God has spoken or will yet speak in the future.

Occasionally, we hear certain Latter-day Saint teachings—like some of those concerning the Savior that I have detailed earlier—described as *unbiblical* or of a particular doctrine being *contradictory* to the Bible. Let us be clear on this matter. The Bible is one of the books within our standard works, and thus our doctrines and practices are in harmony with the Bible. There are times, of course, when latter-day revelation provides clarification or additional information to the Bible. But addition to the canon is hardly the same as rejection of the canon. Supplementation is not the same as contradiction. All of the prophets, including the Savior Himself, were sent to bring new light and knowledge to the world; in many cases, new scripture came as a result of their ministry. New scripture did not invalidate what went before, nor did it close the door to subsequent revelation. As the Lord declared through Nephi, "Wherefore, because that ye have a Bible ye need not suppose that it

15. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 495; emphasis added.

contains all my words; neither need ye suppose that I have not caused more to be written" (2 Nephi 29:10).

Most New Testament scholars believe that Mark's account was the first Gospel written and that Matthew and Luke drew upon Mark in the preparation of their Gospels. One tradition is that John the Beloved, aware of the work done already by the synoptists, prepared his Gospel in an effort to "fill in the gaps" and thus deal more with the great spiritual verities that his evangelistic colleagues chose not to include. Would anyone in the Christian tradition today dare suggest that what Matthew or Luke did in adding to what Mark had written was illegal or inappropriate or irreverent? Do we suppose that anyone in the first century would have so felt?

Would John's effort, presumably written many years after the synoptics, have been viewed with disdain or suspicion by the Saints of his day? I would not think so. Would anyone accuse Matthew or Luke or John of writing about or even worshipping a "different Jesus" because they were bold enough to add to what had been recorded already? Surely not. Why? Because Matthew and Luke and John were inspired of God, perhaps even divinely commissioned by the Church to pen their testimonies.

If Luke (in his Gospel, as well as in Acts) or John chose to write of subsequent appearances of the Lord Jesus after his ascension into heaven, appearances not found in Mark or Matthew, are we prone to criticize, to cry foul? No, because these accounts are contained in the biblical canon, that collection of Old and New Testament books that serve as the rule of faith and practice in the Christian world. And here we come face to face with an age-old question, Is a writing authoritative because it is in the canon, or is it in the canon because it is authoritative?

In speaking of the canon, the respected biblical scholar

F. F. Bruce observed that "there is a distinction between the canonicity of a book of the Bible and its authority. Its canonicity is dependent upon its authority. For when we ascribe canonicity to a book we simply mean that it belongs to the canon or list. But why does it so belong? Because it was recognized as possessing special authority. People frequently speak and write as if the authority with which the books of the Bible are invested in the minds of Christians is the result of their having been included in the sacred list. But the historical fact is the other way about; they were and are included in the list because they were acknowledged as authoritative." Bruce concludes, "Both logically and historically, authority precedes canonicity."¹⁶

The authority of scripture is tied to its source. The living, breathing, ever-relevant nature of the word of God is linked not to written words, not even to the writings of Moses or Isaiah or Malachi, not to the four Gospels or the epistles of Paul, but rather to the spirit of prophecy and revelation that illuminated and empowered those who recorded them in the first place. The Bible does in fact contain much that can and should guide our walk and talk; it contains the word and will of the Lord to men and women in earlier ages, and its timeless truths have tremendous normative value for our day. But we do not derive authority to speak or act in the name of Deity on the basis of what God gave to his people in an earlier dispensation.

Just how bold is the Latter-day Saint claim? How strange is it to propose that we require a living tree of life in our day? In a letter to his uncle, Silas Smith, Joseph wrote in 1833 of the need for continual direction through prophets:

Seeing that the Lord has never given the world to

16. F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments* (Westwood, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1963), 95-96; see also F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974), 27.

understand by anything heretofore revealed that he had ceased forever to speak to his creatures when sought unto in a proper manner, why should it be thought a thing incredible that he should be pleased to speak again in these last days for their salvation? Perhaps you may be surprised at this assertion that I should say "for the salvation of his creatures in these last days" since we have already in our possession a vast volume of his word [the Bible] which he has previously given. But you will admit that the word spoken to Noah was not sufficient for Abraham. . . . Isaac, the promised seed, was not required to rest his hope upon the promises made to his father Abraham, but was privileged with the assurance of [God's] approbation in the sight of heaven by the direct voice of the Lord to him. . . . I have no doubt but that the holy prophets and apostles and saints in the ancient days were saved in the kingdom of God. . . . I may believe that Enoch walked with God. I may believe that Abraham communed with God and conversed with angels. . . . And have I not an equal privilege with the ancient saints? And will not the Lord hear my prayers, and listen to my cries as soon [as] he ever did to theirs, if I come to him in the manner they did? Or is he a respecter of persons?¹⁷

Latter-day Saints feel a deep allegiance to the Bible. It seems odd to us, however, to be accused of being irreverent or disloyal to the Bible when we suggest to the religious world that the God of heaven has chosen to speak again. Our challenge is hauntingly reminiscent of that faced by Peter, James, John, or Paul when they declared to the religious establishment of their day that God had sent new truths and new revelations into the world—truths that supplemented and even

17. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 297–301; spelling and punctuation corrected.

clarified the Old Testament. And what was the response of the Jews of the day? "Who do you think you are?" they essentially asked. "We have the law and the prophets. They are sufficient." Any effort to add to or take away from that collection of sacred writings was suspect and subject to scorn and ridicule. And so it is today.

We feel to declare, as did the Apostle Paul to Felix: "But this I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets" (Acts 24:14; compare 26:22). We declare that the Lord Jehovah, who revealed Himself to Adam and Abraham and Micah; the God of our fathers who spoke through the mouths of Jacob and Joseph and Jeremiah; the same being who came to dwell in a tabernacle of clay and who taught Andrew and Nathaniel and Matthew—we declare that this same being, Jesus the Christ, has revealed Himself and His everlasting gospel in these last days. We have received a commission to make these things known to the world. It would be unchristian *not* to share what has been communicated to us.

THE UNSELFISH CHRIST

The final point I wish to make is that the Christ of the Restoration—the one we believe was and is the eternal Jehovah, as well as the Savior of the New Testament—is an unselfish being. While He is a glorified, exalted, perfected personage, He is also one who yearns to forgive our sins and purify our hearts, one who delights "to honor those who serve [Him] in righteousness and in truth" (D&C 76:5). That is, He is not possessive of His powers, nor is He hesitant about dispensing spiritual gifts or sharing His divine attributes.

We come to the earth to take a physical body, be schooled, and gain experiences in this second estate that we could not have in the first estate, the premortal life. We then strive to

keep the commandments and grow in faith and spiritual graces until we are prepared to go where God and Christ are. Eternal life consists in being with God; in addition, it entails being like God. A study of Christian history reveals that the doctrine of the deification of man was taught at least into the fifth century by such notables as Irenaus, Clement of Alexandria, Justin Martyr, Athanasius, and Augustine.¹⁸ Because we know that many plain and precious truths were taken from the Bible before it was compiled (see 1 Nephi 13:20-39; preface to D&C 76), we might not agree with some of what was taught about deification by such Christian thinkers, but it is clear that the idea was not foreign to the people of the early Church.

Nor has this idea been completely lost from Christian thinking in our own time. "The Son of God became a man," C. S. Lewis pointed out, "to enable men to become sons of God."¹⁹ Further, Lewis explained: God "said (in the Bible) that we were 'gods' and He is going to make good His words. If we let Him—for we can prevent Him, if we choose—He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful; but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what He said."²⁰ I honestly don't know what Lewis meant fully (and certainly what he understood or intended) by these statements. The doctrine of the

18. See Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christian?* 60-61.

19. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 155; see also C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 18.

20. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 176.

deification of man did not originate with Lewis, nor with the Latter-day Saints; it is to be found throughout Christian history. Whether Lewis would have agreed fully with the teachings of such notables as Irenaus, Clement of Alexandria, Justin Martyr, Athanasius, and Augustine on deification—or, for that matter, with what the Latter-day Saints teach—I cannot tell. What is clear to me is that the scriptures teach that all men and women, like Christ, are made in the image and likeness of God (see Genesis 1:27; Moses 2:27), and so it is neither robbery nor heresy for the children of God to aspire to be like God or the Son of God (see Matthew 5:48; 3 Nephi 12:48; Philippians 2:6). Like any parent, our Heavenly Father would surely want us to become and be all that He is. We acquire the attributes of godliness by overcoming the world through the Atonement (see 1 John 5:4–5; Revelation 2:7, 11; D&C 76:51–60), becoming heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ, who is the natural heir (see Romans 8:17; Galatians 4:7), and thus inheriting all things, just as Jesus inherits all things (see 1 Corinthians 3:21–23; Revelation 21:7; D&C 76:55, 95; 84:38; 88:107). In that glorified state, we will be conformed to the image of the Lord Jesus (see Romans 8:29; 1 Corinthians 15:49; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 1 John 3:2; Alma 5:14), receive His glory, and be one with Him and with the Father (see John 17:21–23; Philippians 3:21).

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that all those who keep God's commandments "shall grow up from grace to grace, and become heirs of the heavenly kingdom, and joint heirs with Jesus Christ; possessing the same mind, being transformed into the same image or likeness." Truly, "as the Son partakes of the fulness of the Father through the Spirit, so the Saints are, by the same Spirit, to be partakers of the same fulness, to enjoy the same glory; for as the Father and Son are one, so, in like manner, the Saints are to be one in them. Through the

love of the Father, the mediation of Jesus Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, they are to be heirs of God, and joint heirs with Jesus Christ.²¹

Although we know from modern revelation that godhood ultimately comes through the receipt of eternal life (see D&C 132:19–20), we do not believe we will ever, worlds without end, unseat or oust God the Eternal Father or His Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ; those holy beings are and forever will be the Gods we worship. Even though we believe in the ultimate deification of man, I am unaware of any authoritative statement in Latter-day Saint literature that suggests that we will ever worship any being other than the Father, the Author of the plan of salvation, and His Son Jesus Christ, our Lord and Redeemer.²²

CONCLUSION

Jesus Christ is the central figure in the doctrine and practice of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He is "God the Second, the Redeemer."²³ He is the Prototype of all saved beings, the standard of salvation.²⁴ Jesus explained that "no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). We have been instructed from the beginning of time to do all that we do in the name of the Son; thus, our sermons, testimonies, prayers, and ordinances are performed in the name of Jesus Christ (see 3 Nephi 18:19; Moses 5:8).

We acknowledge Jesus Christ as the source of truth and redemption, as the light and life of the world, as the way to the Father (see John 14:6; 2 Nephi 25:29; 3 Nephi 11:11). We

21. Smith, *Lectures on Faith*, 5:2–3.

22. See Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 22.

23. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 190.

24. See Smith, *Lectures on Faith* 7:9.

worship Him in that we look to Him for deliverance and redemption and seek to emulate His matchless life (see D&C 93:12–20). Truly, as Nephi proclaimed, “We talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, . . . that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins” (2 Nephi 25:26). We have been invited to come unto Christ—to learn of Him, to listen to His words, to walk in the meekness of His Spirit (see D&C 19:23)—and thereby grow into a meaningful spiritual union with Him.

As to whether we worship a “different Jesus,” we say again: We accept and endorse the testimony of the New Testament writers. Jesus is the Promised Messiah, the Resurrection and the Life (see John 11:25), literally the Light of the world (see John 8:12). Everything that testifies of His divine birth, His goodness, His transforming power, and His godhood, we embrace enthusiastically. He has broken the bands of death and lives today. All this we know and rejoice in. But we also rejoice in the additional knowledge latter-day prophets have provided about our Lord and Savior. President Brigham Young thus declared that “*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.*”²⁵

It is the “more” that makes many in the Christian world very nervous and usually suspicious of us. But it is the “more” that allows us to make a significant contribution in the religious world. President Boyd K. Packer observed: “If we thought only in terms of diplomacy or popularity, surely we

25. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 13:56; emphasis added.

should change our course. But we must hold tightly to it even though some turn away. It is little wonder that our missionaries are sometimes thought to be overbearing, even when they are most courteous. If our main desire is to be accepted and approved, surely we will feel uncomfortable when others reject the [restored] gospel." He also affirmed: "We do not claim that others have no truth. . . . Converts to the Church may bring with them all the truth they possess and have it added upon. And finally, if we can stand without shame, without hesitancy, without embarrassment, without reservation to bear witness that the gospel has been restored, that there are prophets and Apostles upon the earth, that the truth is available for all mankind, the Lord's Spirit will be with us. And that assurance can be affirmed to others."²⁶

I know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and that He was crucified for the sins of the world. This knowledge has come to me as a gift of the Spirit (see D&C 46:13). Knowing what I know, feeling what I feel, and having experienced what I have in regard to the person and power of the Savior, it is difficult for me to be patient and loving toward those who denounce as non-Christian both me and others who feel as I do. But I am constrained to do so in the spirit of Him who also was misunderstood and misrepresented. While it would be a wonderful thing to have others acknowledge our Christianity, we do not court favor, nor will we ever compromise our distinctiveness. Indeed, our strength is in our distinctiveness.

We believe the only hope for the world is to come unto Christ. The answer to the world's problems—the vexing dilemmas of starvation, famine, disease, crime, inhumanity, and the dissolution of the nuclear family—is ultimately not to

26. Boyd K. Packer, Conference Report, October 1985, 104, 107.

be found in more extravagant social programs or stronger legislation. We acknowledge and value the good that is done by so many to bring the message of Jesus from the New Testament to a world that desperately needs it. At the same time, we feel to say to a drifting world that there is more truth to be known, more power to be exercised, and more profound fulfillment to be had. As President Howard W. Hunter pointed out, "We seek to bring all truth together. We seek to enlarge the circle of love and understanding among all the people of the earth. Thus we strive to establish peace and happiness, not only within Christianity but among all mankind."²⁷

The First Presidency of the Church in 1907 made the following declaration: "Our motives are not selfish; our purposes not petty and earth-bound; we contemplate the human race, past, present and yet to come, as immortal beings, for whose salvation it is our mission to labor; and to this work, broad as eternity and deep as the love of God, we devote ourselves, now, and forever."²⁸

27. Howard W. Hunter, *That We Might Have Joy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 59.

28. First Presidency, Conference Report, April 1907, 16; in Hunter, *That We Might Have Joy*, 59.