



The Sermon on the Mount, by Harry Anderson

The law we follow is not simply a set of principles, stipulations, and commandments (though these play a crucial role) but rather a life of worship founded on obedience to Christ himself, who embodies the law.

Christ as Our Law: He Who Sanctifies, Enlightens, and Saves

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The doctrine of Christ is a living, practical theology of discipleship (see 2 Nephi 31:21, Doctrine and Covenants 10:62). With the revelations given to Joseph Smith, particularly those in the Doctrine and Covenants, the faith of the Latter-day Saints is grounded in the realm of practical behavior—of religious life ordered for individuals and the Church by laws, principles, and, above all, covenants and ordinances given us by Deity. But all these point to Christ himself as the law. Clearly there are elements of correct belief or orthodoxy, but these are primarily useful because they point us to faith in Christ and establish how we come to him through covenants and ordinances. Indeed, the gospel law that we follow is more than a mere program for personal improvement or a set of moral imperatives; it is something that establishes us and keeps us in a living relation with a living being—our Lord Jesus Christ—who, if we will let him, will be the law that can govern, preserve, perfect, and sanctify us.

With respect to Christ being the law, I mean that he is ultimately the person we follow and submit to. The law we follow, the truth we come to know, the light and life we experience—all of this is fundamentally Christ

himself.¹ This is perhaps best illustrated in the understanding Elder Bruce D. Porter came to when, as a university student, he spent several hours one evening studying carefully and prayerfully the doctrine of Christ. In the process of this, he was overcome with the reality of Christ being the center of all: “I received a pure witness by the power of the Holy Ghost that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world, a living being, my friend and support in every time of need. *Until that day, my faith had been centered in a set of principles and doctrines. From that day on, my faith centered in a living being.* That testimony has been the guiding star of my life.”²

Obeying Christ Glorifies Us

This view of Christ as the law helps us understand sections 76 and 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants with respect to the degrees of glory and the conditions attending those glories, including those who have no glory. Significantly, the law of the celestial kingdom is said to be the law of Christ, with varying degrees of that law or light of Christ being present in each of the other kingdoms of glory.

Section 88 explains that one inherits a kingdom of glory according to the law one is willing to abide by. If one will abide the law of Christ—the law of the celestial kingdom, one can inherit that glory. If one cannot abide that glory, perhaps one can abide the law and inherit the glory of a lesser kingdom. Those who cannot abide any law from Christ—those who are laws unto themselves and fully desire to abide in sin—are “not meet for a kingdom of glory” but “must abide a kingdom which is not a kingdom of glory” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:21–24). This group (described as sons of perdition in section 76) will be quickened or resurrected to “enjoy that which they are willing to receive, because they were not willing to enjoy that which they might have received. For what doth it profit a man if a gift is bestowed upon him and he receive not the gift? Behold, he rejoices not in that which is given unto him, neither rejoices in him that is the giver of the gift” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:32–33).

Sons of perdition are said to knowingly deny Christ’s truth: “Having denied the Holy Spirit after having received it, and having denied the Only Begotten Son of the Father [‘after the Father has revealed him’ (Doctrine and Covenants 76:43)], having crucified him unto themselves and put him to an open shame” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:35). These do not simply

turn from Christ but, as section 76 says, “*deny* the truth and *defy* [his] power” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:31; emphasis added).

Those of the telestial kingdom reject both the testimony of Jesus and the gospel of Christ, saying they are *some* of Christ and some of Paul and Moses and Cephas (Christ’s prophets) but not turning fully to Christ and his gospel, his prophets, or “the everlasting covenant” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:99–101).³ Interestingly, with respect to their attitude toward Christ, the text reads, “These all shall bow the knee, and every tongue confess to him, . . . [receiving] a place in the mansions prepared [being] servants of the Most High.” There are limits to the rewards, for “where God and Christ dwell they cannot come, worlds without end” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:110–12).

With respect to Christ and what is received of him, the terrestrial kingdom is said to be populated with those who receive the *testimony of Jesus* (either in this life or in the next) but do not remain valiant in that testimony and do not receive the fullness of the gospel.⁴ The reception of the testimony of Jesus and the failure to be valiant in that testimony seems to mark those in this kingdom, who are among the resurrection of the just, and are described as the honorable men of the earth—the kind of people, I take it, who you’d like to have be your neighbor. “These are they who receive of the presence of the Son, but not of the fullness of the Father” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:77). There is a good deal of reception (more than just an acknowledgment) of the Christ here—of his law and light and of his person, but not of a fullness.

In the celestial kingdom dwell those who “received the testimony of Jesus and believed on his name and were baptized after the manner of his burial, being buried in the water in his name, and this according to the commandment which he has given—that by keeping the commandments they might be washed and cleansed from all their sins, and receive the Holy Spirit by the laying on of the hands of him who is ordained and sealed unto this power; and who overcome by faith, and are sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, which the Father sheds forth upon all those who are just and true” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:51–53).

Additionally, with reference to their relation to Christ, we read that they are of the Church of the Firstborn and that “they are gods, even the sons of God—wherefore, all things are theirs, whether life or death, or things present, or things to come, all are theirs and they are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s. And they shall overcome all things. Wherefore, let no man glory in man, but rather let him glory in God, who shall subdue all enemies under his feet. These shall

dwell in the presence of God and his Christ forever and ever” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:58–62).

We learn that those of the celestial kingdom are “just men made perfect through Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, who wrought out this perfect atonement through the shedding of this blood.” And we read that “they who dwell in his presence” (and here the text refers to the Father) “are the church of the Firstborn; and they see as they are seen, and know as they are known, having received of his fulness and of his grace; and he makes them equal in power, and in might, and in dominion” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:69, 94–95). Those in this kingdom certainly followed Christ and received from him grace for grace, as section 93 confirms. All of this, of course, shows not only the path one takes to be with him but also the relation of oneness we can be brought into.⁵

Obeying Christ Sanctifies Us

Section 93 shows how Christ grew from grace to grace, receiving and returning grace to his Father, and how we worship by following Christ and, through him, grow grace for grace and “come to the Father in [Christ’s] name, and in due time receive of his fulness” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:19; see Doctrine and Covenants 93:11–20). The heart of our worship becomes discipleship—emulation of Christ.⁶ He is the way of our return, and any truth, law, light, goodness, or holiness we attain must be subservient to and put in the service of our heartfelt, whole-souled discipleship. The way he governs individuals and his Church is an integral element of that discipleship, both because the law reveals what the Lord asks of his people but also because it reveals the way Christ lives—the way he is, indeed, the way he himself is governed by his Father’s will—and therefore what we are to seek to be like. Thus law is an essential aspect of the life of emulative worship.⁷ Such worship is founded on and given life by recognizing that the law we follow is not simply a set of principles, stipulations, and commandments (though these play a crucial role) but rather a life of worship founded on obedience to Christ himself, who embodies the law.

Significantly, section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants holds a high place for law, setting forth what law has the potential to do: “That which is governed by law is also preserved by law and perfected and sanctified by the same.” Those that allow themselves to be governed by law will experience its preserving, perfecting, and sanctifying power. Conversely, for those

who refuse to be governed by law, there follow inevitable and lasting consequences: “That which breaketh a law, and abideth not by law, but seeketh to become a law unto itself, and willeth to abide in sin, and altogether abideth in sin, cannot be sanctified by law, neither by mercy, justice, nor judgment. . . . [but will] remain filthy still” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:34–35). The differences between the results of allowing law to govern us and simply doing things our way couldn’t be more stark: a condition of sanctification or an ultimate state of filthiness. Significantly, the Lord lays out kingdoms of glory (degrees somewhere between those two poles) in which one will inherit a kingdom according to his or her willingness and ability to abide the law of that kingdom (see Doctrine and Covenants 88:21–24, 36–40).

Obeying Christ Enlightens Us

In section 88, the law is equated with light that proceeds from God’s presence, lighting our eyes and understanding, filling “the immensity of space,” being in and giving life to all things, and governing all (see Doctrine and Covenants 88:11–13). At least in some measure, what is being described here is the same light or spirit that section 84 describes as being given unto all, developmentally enlightening those that follow it, and bringing those who follow it to “God, even the Father,” who “teacheth him of the covenant” (Doctrine and Covenants 84:45–48). All are given this light, though, of course, one can reject the light or receive only a portion of that light, according to what they are willing to do. Nevertheless, the Lord reveals the course laid out before those that fully receive his law or light: “That which is of God is light, and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light growth brighter and brighter until the perfect day” (Doctrine and Covenants 50:24).

This revelation implies that we have a different relationship to Christ’s law and light than the rest of the universe does. Section 88 describes law or light as governing all things, including the earth, the planets, and the universe, but it does not say the obedience of the cosmos is on the same level as that of human beings. In whatever way the earth is given law and governed by Christ, it is clear that the earth doesn’t obey as an agent in the same sense we do. It simply, inevitably, obeys, and as such fulfills the measure of its creation. Human beings, on the other hand, can receive or reject the law in varying degrees. We are agents, who, having been given the law, can receive it or not—can say yes or no to it. As such, Christ is our law, the law that can save and

sanctify us, to the degree that we allow him to fully be our law by receiving and abiding in him.

The risen Christ tells the Nephites that he is the lawgiver and that they, as his covenant people, must know the ultimate relation they have to him: “I am the law, and the light” (3 Nephi 15:9). A similar kind of thought to this “I am the law” is set forward in numerous places in which Christ identifies himself as the way, truth, light, life, and so forth. These terms, each with its own nuanced meaning, are often used synonymously, particularly in section 88, where, for instance, the Lord says “the *light* which is in all things” is that “which giveth *life* to all things” and is the “*law* by which all things are governed, even the *power* of God” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:13). All of these come together and adhere in the person of Christ, revealing a Christ-centered foundation, where the Christ of the universe, who establishes law and governs the cosmos, is likewise intimately revealed to individuals as the law that can govern their lives if they will let him.

This law extends higher than just Christ because he, as section 93 and other scriptures attest, submits to the will of his Father. Thus our law is Christ, who serves as an example and teacher of how to submit to his Father as a source for that law; as a Savior for when we haven’t kept that law, leading us through repentance; and as one who gives enabling grace in empowering us to live that law and who is himself, along with the presence of his Father, the reward for living that law. So our commitment isn’t to an abstract something or other of law or truth, but to a person.⁸

We Must Come to Know Christ

With Christ as law, we find a perfect example of such principles as justice, righteousness, mercy, truth, goodness, and holiness, not by independently working out what would be the right mix theoretically, but by observing their full, combined manifestation in Christ’s person. His will (always one with his Father’s will) will be manifest to us in what is revealed in the written word, revealed by living prophets, and revealed to us as a Church and to individuals by the light of Christ and the Holy Ghost—which, as Nephi reminds us, speaks the words of Christ (see 2 Nephi 32:3). The presence of the Holy Ghost in all of this is essential in revealing to us Christ’s will, the law.

Because Christ is a person and not simply a set of principles, stipulations, or independent governing laws or regularities, our response to law in this sense is a response to him and a coming to know him. What governs all

things is a divine person more than an ordered set of moral and universal laws (though these may follow, secondarily). In following the law of Christ spoken of in section 88 (a law which is, at times, also equated with light, love, power, and truth), we not only come to know divine law and a divine way of being, but we come to know Christ. We come to know how the law and Christ are one, even as we are made one with him.

This deeply personal aspect of Christ's interaction with us comes out most clearly after section 88 speaks in rather cosmic language. Following the Lord's description of his being the light and law in all things, manifesting the wonder and glory of the universe, the suns and planets and stars that move with each other in order, the Lord says, "Behold, all these are kingdoms, and any man who hath seen any or the least of these hath seen God moving in his majesty and power. I say unto you, he hath seen him; nevertheless, he who came unto his own was not comprehended. The light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehendeth it not; nevertheless, the day shall come when you shall comprehend even God, being quickened in him and by him" (Doctrine and Covenants 88:47–49).

This impressive universe is not simply something meant to awe and impress (though it does do that, especially in relation to the human being blessed to see these things with spiritual eyes); in experiencing these things, we come to know the power of the Creator and Sustainer of all this as we come to know him. When we see his hand and power in the universe, the Lord then indicates what we will ultimately come to know: "Then shall ye know that ye have seen me, that I am, and that I am the true light that *is in you*, and that you are in me; otherwise ye could not abound" (Doctrine and Covenants 88:50; emphasis added). The light and power speak and work within us and in our hearts, intimately, clearly and powerfully, causing us to flourish in our spiritual lives—"my voice is Spirit; my Spirit is truth; truth abideth and hath no end; and if it be in you it shall abound" (Doctrine and Covenants 88:66).

This notion of a real, personal (though thoroughly divine) person is seen in the parable of the field and the laborers—a parable used precisely to help us understand what the Lord has said in section 88 about laws being given that govern heaven and earth and planets, their orbits, and their giving light to each other, all of which manifest "God moving in his majesty and power" (Doctrine and Covenants 88:42–47). In this parable, twelve individuals are sent to labor in the field, with each being visited in turn by the man who sent

them. “And he said unto the first: Go ye and labor in the field, and in the first hour I will come unto you, and ye shall behold the joy of my countenance. And he said unto the second: Go ye also into the field, and in the second hour I will visit you with the joy of my countenance” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:52–53). The Lord sends all twelve and then visits all in succession from the first to the last:

And thus they all received the light of the countenance of their lord [and each made glad in that light, as it says of the first visited], every man in his hour, and in his time, and in his season—

Beginning at the first, and so on unto the last, and from the last unto the first, and from the first unto the last;

Every man in his own order, until his hour was finished, even according as his lord had commanded him, that his lord might be glorified in him, and he in his lord, that they all might be glorified. (Doctrine and Covenants 88:58–60)

The personal, individual care here for each laborer by the Lord must not be missed. In the vast created universe, the Lord gives attention, one by one, to each that he sends. Then, to drive this home to those first receiving the revelation of section 88, the Lord gives this for them and us to reflect on:

I say unto you, my friends, I leave these sayings with you to ponder in your hearts, with this commandment which I give unto you, that ye shall call upon me while I am near—

Draw near unto me and I will draw near unto you; seek me diligently and ye shall find me; ask, and ye shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

Whatsoever ye ask the Father in my name it shall be given unto you, that is expedient for you;

And if your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in you; and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things.

Therefore, sanctify yourselves that your minds become single to God, and the days will come that you shall see him; for he will unveil his face unto you, and it shall be in his own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will. (Doctrine and Covenants 88:62–68)

The personal reality spoken of here is likewise emphasized in section 76 with the promise that the Lord will continue to reveal the same things revealed in the vision Joseph and Sidney have, granting others the “privilege of seeing and knowing for themselves. . . [that] they may be able to bear his presence in the world of glory” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:117–118).

Similarly, in section 93 we read, “Verily, thus saith the Lord: It shall come to pass that every soul who forsaketh his sins and cometh unto me, and

Christ Visits the New World, by Walter Rane



callesth on my name, and obeyeth my voice, and keepeth my commandments, shall see my face and know that I am; and that I am the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world; and that I am in the Father, and the Father in me, and the Father and I are one” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:1–3).

These sacred promises are a hallmark of the Restoration, which has, as a key principle, the teaching that a person can and must come to know God for him or herself. As President Boyd K. Packer said, the purpose of all these promises of coming to know God is not to make us sign seekers. Verse 68 of section 88 gives us the clue here—our effort should be to sanctify ourselves, leaving the revelation to God. The Lord will take care of the how and when of the revelation as he wills (see Doctrine and Covenants 88:68).

Christ Ultimately Saves Us

Another implication in all of this is that it isn’t the law that saves a person. Christ does. And this isn’t just to say that the law alone can’t save us. Clearly it can’t. We all fall short, not only with our sinfulness but in our failure to actually abide the law in the highest sense. It isn’t just that we are sinful, but even should we be forgiven and set right, we simply aren’t up to snuff with the divine attributes that the law demands. Even if we were to obey perfectly, something would be missing if the law were an independent reality, not bound up in and leading us to Christ. Then again, if we see that Christ is the law, in that sense the law (or Christ) does save us. That may be the meaning we should take from verse 34 of section 88: “That which is governed by law is also preserved by law and perfected and sanctified by the same.” Clearly scripture teaches that the law can’t save us, and yet this passage says it is precisely the law which perfects and sanctifies us. One way to solve this seeming tension is simply to read Christ as the law that saves, and conclude that the law he gives in itself will save only as it points us to him and we turn to him.

Of course, the written given law has a place. The Lord himself gives it to us, and it is one of the ways the Lord manifests his will to us. But its ultimate fulfillment comes in the form of the life-giving power in the relationship it creates between the lawgiver and the follower. Thus, we might see the given law as secondary to, or an extension of, Christ. It is the note left by a loved one on the table, so to speak, that serves a real purpose as a communication from a real person. To have the effect it should have, the proper obedience of any divine law must consist of a response to, obedience to, and submission to him, not something independent of him.

A key passage that comes to mind when speaking of law and the life of discipleship is the statement that links obedience to law with the reception of blessings: “There is a law irrevocably decreed in heaven . . . upon which all blessings are predicated—and when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law” (Doctrine and Covenants 130:20–21). It would be easy to read this as a kind of self-sustaining law, independent from God, which one follows and gets the desired, inevitable results. You put in the obedience coin, so to speak, and the blessing can be received. I’ve even heard some say that when you obey God has to bless you, as if we control what blessings we receive and how. The point I hope to show is that our obedience is to a being, not to an independent law apart from or beyond him, and that this will show a better reading of this passage that does not put God out of the process.

Of course, from a certain point of view, we might look and say that some aspect of the law may, generally speaking, be true or good whether one believed in God or not. Society might see that it is good not to kill, steal, lie, and so forth. We might note that marital fidelity is good for individuals and families and societies. Those things seem to be a visible, obvious good whether individuals or societies believe God is real and is behind those laws or not.

But the reality of God establishing divine law and himself being the law makes a tremendous difference when seen from the full perspective of discipleship. There are good reasons for believing why the reality of God is necessary and, in the fullest sense, a way of happiness and a law that governs the life of a Latter-day Saint disciple of Christ, that the most prominent of which is that Christ serves as exemplar of the law, as the lawgiver and source of law, but also as the law himself.

Thus, with respect to section 130, a better way to read that is not to say that there is a specific, independent blessing associated with specific behavior, but rather that the principle spoken of is the principle of aligning ourselves with God’s will and then asking in faith, under the guidance of the Spirit, for that which, in specific terms used in the scripture, is good, right, and expedient (Moroni 7:26; 3 Nephi 18:20; Doctrine and Covenants 88:64). The principle is asking according to God’s will—a will that shall be made known to us, always according to the Lord’s own time, way, and will (2 Nephi 4:35; Doctrine and Covenants 46:30). Clearly wonderful, even specific, blessings come from following the laws of marital fidelity, tithing, sacrifice, the Word

of Wisdom, and so forth, but whatever attendant blessings may come from those, that which underlies them all—the blessing we get from any true obedience—is found in being reconciled to God and the blessings that come (in good times or in bad) of being properly related to God, in growing to know and be like our Father through our submission to and following of Christ. Our obedience to any law or principle is not experienced properly, is not true obedience, if it is not, to the core, an obedience to Christ as the law. All the laws and principles of the gospel are wrapped up together in a totality of our discipleship of him.

Notes

1. The idea of Christ as law, truth, way, and life (again, terms that in the scriptures are often used interchangeable) and he himself being our foundation has been made by others also. For instance, Dietrich Bonhoeffer argues that cheap grace is grace as a principle or a system, and not the costly grace received from Christ in our genuinely seeking to be his disciples. *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 45–46. Similarly, the Danish Christian thinker Soren Kierkegaard argues, “The Christian Thesis is not: *intelligere ut credam*, nor is it *credere, ut intelligam*. No, it is: Act according to the command and orders of Christ; do the will of the Father—and you will become a believing person.” Soren Kierkegaard, *Soren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967–78), 3:363. Similar ideas of the centrality of Christ over a system can be found among Latter-day Saint philosophers such as James E. Faulconer, “Truth, Virtue, and Perspectivism,” in *Virtue and the Abundant Life*, ed. Lloyd D. Newell, Terrence D. Olsen, Emily M. Reynolds, and Richard Williams (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 65–89. See also C. Terry Warner, “Commitment and Life’s Meaning,” in *To the Glory of God: Mormon Essays on Great Issues*, ed. Truman G. Madsen and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 33–62. See also C. Terry Warner’s entry, “Truth,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 4:1489–91.

2. As quoted in Elder Neil L. Anderson’s Facebook page, April 1, 2017 (emphasis added). Sister Porter reports, “From that point forward, Bruce focused on becoming a servant and a friend of Christ. His allegiance was not to a list, but to a person.”

3. Doctrine and Covenants 76:82 also confirms that they reject the testimony of Jesus and the gospel.

4. I’m following the division here first pointed out by Stephen Robinson of the division between the gospel and the generic testimony of Jesus. See Stephen E. Robinson and H. Dean Garrett, *A Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 2:314–17.

5. This paper has focused on the individual in his or her relationship to Christ as the law. Of course, even that individual is not an isolated being. We are members one of another, says Paul. Indeed, the Doctrine and Covenants speaks of the Lord’s people, a Church, Zion, and so forth. Even the celestial kingdom is a place of a society, with those there being said to be of the Church of the Firstborn. All of this, of course, indicates that we might profitably ask

how the idea of Christ as law would play out in more communal, ecclesiastical aspects. Such an important discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

6. As Elder Bruce R. McConkie has stated, “True and perfect worship consists in following in the steps of the Son of God; it consists in keeping the commandments and obeying the will of the Father to that degree that we advance from grace to grace until we are glorified in Christ as he is in his Father. It is far more than prayer and sermon and song. It is living and doing and obeying. It is emulating the life of the great Exemplar.” Bruce R. McConkie, “How to Worship,” *Ensign*, December 1971, 130.

7. Though section 88 does talk about how the worlds are created, maintained, perfected, even sanctified by law, it is not my purpose in this paper to deal with those at length. My purpose is to concentrate on how law operates in the lives of God’s children. There may be similarities in how human beings follow law in the same way the world, animals, and plants follow laws, but this is going to be different because none of these are children of God in the same human beings are, and none of these are said to be agents in the full sense that human beings are. For a helpful distinction between law of nature (law here is more a description of what things do) and the law God gives human beings, see C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 1952), book 1, chapter 1, “The Law of Human Nature.”

8. This isn’t just to say that our commitment is to the spirit of the law, as opposed to the letter of the law (interpreted as the underlying reason or intent of the law), but to say the law (which will include the spirit and the letter of the law) is bound up in Christ, who manifests to us what the law is and means in the variety of situations, including where the written law may not clearly show what we should be doing.