



Joseph learned in the grove that God knows his children by name, one by one, for the first word spoken to the fourteen-year-old boy was his first name—"Joseph."

# Doctrinal Insights from Joseph Smith's First Vision

ROBERT L. MILLET

Robert L. Millet (robertmillet5@gmail.com) is a professor emeritus of ancient scripture at BYU.

From a presentation at the Church History Symposium on March 12, 2020.

=====

The appearing of the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith is the foundation of this Church,” President David O. McKay stated. “Therein lies the secret of [the Church’s] strength and vitality. . . . What God is, is answered. His relation to his children is clear.”<sup>1</sup> President Ezra Taft Benson pointed out, “Sometimes I think we are so close to [the First Vision] that we don’t fully appreciate its significance and importance and the magnitude of it.” President Benson then added, “*The first vision of the Prophet Joseph Smith is bedrock theology in this Church.*”<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this article is basically to ask ourselves, What difference does Joseph Smith’s First Vision make in terms of what members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe and teach? What foundational truths derive from Joseph’s experience in the Sacred Grove, as described in the contemporary accounts of that vision?<sup>3</sup> While there are many truths and much significant doctrine that we learn through the First Vision, I limited this article to ten points.

1. A *universal apostasy or falling away from the primitive gospel and teachings of Jesus Christ had taken place* sometime following the deaths of the

Savior and his Apostles. The members of the Church of Jesus Christ in the first century were certainly cautioned of a coming apostasy and, in some cases, were even told that the apostasy was already underway. These warnings are found in the writings of Peter (see 2 Peter 2:1–3), Paul (see Acts 20:28–30; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–4; 1 Timothy 4:1–3; 2 Timothy 3:1–8), John (see 1 John 2:18–19; 4:1–2; 2 John 1:7), and Jude (see Jude 1:3–4, 10, 16–19). It is well known that Roman Catholics in the nineteenth century believed in an unbroken line of papal leadership from the Apostle Peter to the current pope. Although Protestants severed their ties to Catholicism through the years of Reformation, they still claimed the same link to first-century Christianity, as did the Catholics.

Many sensitive souls through the centuries following the crucifixion and death of the Savior concluded that all was not right in Christendom. Here are two examples. By the eighteenth century, less than a hundred years before the ministry of Joseph Smith, the prominent Reformed (Calvinist) evangelist Jonathan Edwards taught that “the apostles, in their days, foretold a grand apostasy of the Christian world, which should continue many ages, and observed that there appeared a disposition to such an apostasy, among professing Christians even at that day. And the greater part of the ages which have now elapsed, have been spent in the duration of that grand and general apostasy, under which the Christian world, as it has been called, has been transformed into that which has been vastly more deformed, more dishonorable and hateful to God.”<sup>4</sup>

One of the principal religious figures of the early nineteenth century was Alexander Campbell, a contemporary of the Prophet Joseph Smith and the founder of what became the Disciples of Christ and Church of Christ movements. Campbell’s dissatisfaction with nominal Christianity is apparent in a statement from the first issue of a magazine he published called the *Christian Baptist*: “We are convinced, fully convinced, that the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint of modern fashionable Christianity.”<sup>5</sup> Campbell additionally “condemned all beliefs and practices that could not be validated by apostolic mandates. He proclaimed that missionary societies, tract societies, Bible societies, synods, associations, and theological seminaries were inconsistent with pure religion.”<sup>6</sup>

In Joseph Smith’s earliest (1832) account of the First Vision, he explained that “from the age of twelve years to fifteen I pondered many things in my heart concerning the situation of the world of mankind, the contentions and



Ask of God, by Sandra Rast



divisions, the wickedness and abominations and the darkness which pervaded the minds of mankind. . . . By searching the scriptures, I found that mankind did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatized from the true and living faith, and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament.”<sup>7</sup>

In Orson Pratt’s account of the First Vision (1840), he wrote,

If [Joseph] went to the religious denominations to seek information, each one pointed to its particular tenets, saying—“This is the way, walk ye in it;” while, at the same time, the doctrines of each were, in many respects, in direct opposition to one another. It also occurred to his mind that God was not the author of but one doctrine, and therefore could not acknowledge but one denomination as his church, and that such denomination must be a people who believe and teach that one doctrine (whatever it may be) and build upon the same. He then reflected upon the immense number of doctrines now in the world, which had given rise to many hundreds of different denominations.<sup>8</sup>

In the Church’s official account (1838), Joseph recorded that Christ declared the churches were “all wrong,” that the hearts of the professors (local ministers) were far from the Lord, that some of what they taught was man-made and not heaven-sent, and that while they had a form of godliness, “they

deny the power thereof” (Joseph Smith—History 1:19). In Orson Hyde’s (1842) account, we read that Joseph

discovered the world of religion working under a flood of errors, which, by virtue of their contradictory opinions and principles, laid the foundation for the rise of such different sects and denominations whose feelings toward each other all too often were poisoned by hate, contention, resentment, and anger. He felt that there was only one truth, and that those who understood it correctly all understood it in the same way. Nature had endowed him with a keen critical intellect, and so he looked through the lens of reason and common sense and with pity and contempt upon those systems of religion, which were so opposed to each other and yet were all obviously based on the scriptures.<sup>9</sup>

2. *The creeds of Christianity were unacceptable, even condemned, by the Lord.* The creeds of the Christian Church were those doctrinal formulations and theological pronouncements devised at various Christian church councils, intended to clarify what the correct interpretation of a given doctrine was and thus, at the same time, to identify heresy and heretical interpretations. The earliest of these was the Apostles’ Creed, dating to about AD 140. Creeds were formulated at Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451), and another was dubbed the Athanasian Creed (late 400s to early 500s). There followed many Protestant creeds, some of the more prominent being the Heidelberg Confession (1563), the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England (1563), and, within a hundred years, the Presbyterian Church’s Westminster Confession of Faith (1647).

Let’s examine portions of two of these creeds.

Nicaea (AD 325): “We believe in one God the Father all powerful, maker of all things both seen and unseen. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only begotten, begotten from the Father, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial [of one and the same substance, essence, or nature] with the Father.”

Chalcedon (451): Jesus is “truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [of the same substance or essence] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, . . . one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being

preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons.”

There is no question but that in the grove the Savior denounced religious creeds because of the doctrinal damage they had inflicted over the centuries. They fostered confusion on matters of doctrine, particularly the nature of the Godhead, such as humankind's relationship to Deity.

There is, however, another problem with creeds—they tend to create distance between the children of God—to separate and divide people on the basis of belief; to draw strict lines in the sand between what is “orthodox” and what is “heresy”; to foster suspicion and even antagonism on the part of those who wear their beliefs like a badge of belonging. The Prophet Joseph Smith stated, “Mormonism is truth; and every man who [embraces] it for himself [is] at liberty to embrace every truth. . . . The first and fundamental principle of our holy religion is that we believe that we have a right to embrace all, and every item of truth, without limitation or without being circumscribed or prohibited by the creeds or superstitious notions of men, or by the dominations of one another, when that truth is clearly demonstrated to our minds.”<sup>10</sup> On another occasion he explained, “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>11</sup>

3. *The Bible does not and cannot contain all of God's word.* To state that the Bible is the complete, sufficient, and final word of God (*sola scriptura* for the Protestants)—more specifically, the final written word of God—is to claim more for the Bible than it claims for itself. We are nowhere given to understand that after the ascension of Jesus and the ministry and writings of first-century Apostles that revelation from our Father in Heaven, which could eventually take the form of scripture and thus be added to the canon, would cease. Latter-day Saints would disagree, for example, with the following excerpt from the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, a declaration that reflects the concept of *sola scriptura*: “The New Testament canon is . . . now closed, inasmuch as no new apostolic witness to the historical Christ can now be borne. No new revelation (as distinct from Spirit-given understanding of existing revelation) will be given until Christ comes again.”<sup>12</sup>

There comes to mind the words of the Lord through Nephi, son of Lehi, as he spoke so forcefully about the human inclination to receive additional

scripture: “Wherefore murmur ye, because that ye shall receive more of my word? . . . Because that I have spoken one word ye need not suppose that I cannot speak another; for my work is not yet finished; neither shall it be until the end of man, neither from that time henceforth and forever. Wherefore, because that ye have a Bible ye need not suppose that it contains all my words; neither need ye suppose that I have not caused more to be written” (2 Nephi 29:8–10; see also 28:27, 29–30).

The Prophet Joseph remarked,

From what we can draw from the Scriptures relative to the teaching of heaven, we are induced to think that much instruction has been given to man since the beginning which we do not possess now. . . . We have what we have, and the Bible contains what it does contain; but to say that God never said anything more to man than is there recorded, would be saying at once that we have at last received a revelation: for it must require one to advance thus far, because it is nowhere said in that volume by the mouth of God, that He would not, after giving what is there contained, speak again; and if any man has found out for a fact that the Bible contains all that God ever revealed to man he has ascertained it by an immediate revelation.<sup>13</sup>

Professor Lee M. McDonald, an evangelical Christian scholar, posed some fascinating questions relative to the present closed canon of Christian scripture. “The first question,” he wrote, “and the most important one, is whether the church was right in perceiving the need for a closed canon of scriptures.” McDonald also asked, “Did such a move toward a closed canon of scriptures ultimately (and unconsciously) limit the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the church? . . . On what biblical or historical grounds has the inspiration of God been limited to the written documents that the Church now calls its Bible?” Finally, McDonald inquires, “If the Spirit inspired only the written documents of the first century, does that mean that the same Spirit does not speak today in the church about matters that are of significant concern?”<sup>14</sup>

Latter-day Saints might, with propriety, ask, Who authorized the canon to be closed? Who decided that the Bible was and forevermore would be the final written word of God? Latter-day Saints teach the same basic message that Jesus and Peter and Paul and John delivered to the unbelieving Jews of their day—that the heavens had once again been opened, that new light and knowledge had burst upon the earth, and that God had chosen to reveal himself through the ministry of his Beloved Son and the Master’s ordained Apostles.

The fact of the matter is that no branch of Christianity limits itself entirely to the biblical text alone in making doctrinal decisions and in applying biblical principles. Roman Catholics turn to scripture, to creeds, to church tradition, and to the Magisterium (the teaching office of the Roman Catholic Church) for answers. Protestants, particularly evangelicals, turn to scripture, the Christian creeds, and to linguists and scripture scholars for their answers. Clearly, this is in violation of *sola scriptura*, the clarion call of the Reformation to rely solely upon scripture itself. In fact, there is no final authority on scriptural interpretation when differences arise, which of course they do.

A beloved friend and colleague, Professor Richard J. Mouw of Fuller Theological Seminary, himself a Reformed (Calvinist) scholar, wrote introspectively that “it has often struck me that [the Latter-day Saint] view of later scriptures [beyond the Bible] is much like my own view of the Calvinist creedal documents that I subscribe to. When I was a member of the Christian Reformed Church, I twice pledged my fidelity to a set of documents that were treated in that denomination as guidelines for understanding the biblical message from the standpoint of Reformed orthodoxy. In doing so, I promised . . . to uphold the truth of, along with the classical Christian creeds, three Reformation-era documents.” Mouw went on to say that “it’s not enough to criticize [Latter-day Saints] for treating with great seriousness things that they’ve added on to the biblical message. We all do that kind of thing.”<sup>15</sup>

The Bible is a magnificent tool in the hands of God, but it is too often used as a club or a weapon in the hands of men and women. For a long time now, the Bible has been used to settle disputes of every imaginable kind, even those the prophets never intended to settle. Creeds and biblical interpretations in the nineteenth century served as much to distinguish and divide as they did to inform and unite. Richard Bushman has offered the following assessment of what Joseph Smith faced and what he did: “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.”<sup>16</sup>

4. *Satan is neither myth nor metaphor, but is an actual being who seeks tirelessly to thwart the plan of the Father and thus block the progress of God’s children.* Young Joseph learned firsthand that the evil one is “an actual being from the



unseen world” who possessed great power (see Joseph Smith—History 1:16). Alexander Neibaur, a Jewish convert to the Church from England, heard Joseph Smith relate his experience not long before the martyrdom (1844). In Neibaur’s account we read that Joseph “opened the Bible, and the first passage that struck him was ‘If any man lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not.’ He went into the woods to pray and knelt himself down. His tongue was cleaved to the roof [of his mouth]; he could not utter a word. He felt easier after a while.”<sup>17</sup>

Orson Hyde’s 1842 account is in many ways the most distinctive: “On one occasion, he went to a small grove of trees near his father’s home and knelt down before God in solemn prayer. *The adversary then made several strenuous efforts to cool his ardent soul. He filled his mind with doubts and brought to mind all manner of inappropriate images to prevent him from obtaining the object of his endeavors.* But the overflowing mercy of God came to buoy him up and gave new impetus to his failing strength.”<sup>18</sup>

One wonders whether Joseph may have reflected upon his own encounter with Satan when he translated the following from the golden plates: “For behold, at that day shall [the devil] rage in the hearts of the children of men, and stir them up to anger against that which is good. And others will he pacify, and lull them away into carnal security, that they will say, All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth. . . . And behold, *others he flattereth away, and telleth them there is no hell; and he saith unto them: I am no devil, for there is none*—and thus he whispereth in their ears, until he grasps them with his awful chains, from whence there is no deliverance” (2 Nephi 28:20–22; emphasis added).

We live in a world today in which large numbers of people deny outright the existence of Satan. From an April 2009 report of the Barna Research Group, “Four out of ten Christians (40%) strongly agreed that Satan ‘is not a living being but is a symbol of evil.’”<sup>19</sup> The *Catholic World Report* of September 2017 states, “New research data . . . reveals that Catholics are among the least likely to agree that Satan is a ‘living being.’ . . . Only 17% of all Catholics polled indicated that they viewed Satan as a living presence in the world. Rather, Catholics are more likely to view Satan as a symbol of evil rather than a ‘real’ living being.”<sup>20</sup> The First Vision is, among other things, a clear and poignant evidence that Satan is real, alive, and well on planet earth.

5. *Salvation is in Christ.* Before the boy Prophet in the Sacred Grove stood Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, in company with his Eternal

Father. The testimony of the New Testament writers was that Jesus did in very deed rise from Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. That is, his eternal spirit was reunited with his glorified and exalted body to stand evermore as the pre-eminent testimony that life continues after death; that the Resurrection is an actual, real, and inseparable union of the body and the spirit. No doubt millions of Christians around the world in 1820 believed in the reality of the immortality of the soul, as manifest in the resurrection of Christ. Joseph's was an additional and modern-day witness of the same supreme truth. The mature Prophet could later add his conviction to that of the prophets who had preceded him: "And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him: That he lives!" (Doctrine and Covenants 76:23).

The First Vision testifies that salvation is in Christ. Forgiveness of sin comes only through him. In an address to students at Utah State University in 1971, President Harold B. Lee remarked, "Fifty years ago or more, when I was a missionary, our greatest responsibility was to defend the great truth that the Prophet Joseph Smith was divinely called and inspired and that the Book of Mormon was indeed the word of God. But even at that time there were the unmistakable evidences that there was coming into the religious world actually a question about the Bible and about the divine calling of the Master, Himself. Now, fifty years later, our greatest responsibility and anxiety is to defend the divine mission of our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, for all about us, even among those who claim to be professors of the Christian faith, [we find many who] are not willing to stand squarely in defense of the great truth that our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, was indeed the Son of God."<sup>21</sup>

How much more do people of our day—more than a half century after President Lee's message, a time when religion and religious discourse are being pushed to the margins of society—stand in need of a prophetic witness of the divine sonship of Christ? Consequently, it is deeply significant that the earliest accounts of the Prophet Joseph's theophany are grounded in the testimony of Jesus. From the earliest (1832) account: "I was filled with the Spirit of God, and the Lord opened the heavens upon me. And I saw the Lord, and he spake unto me, saying, '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.*'"<sup>22</sup> In the 1835 account of the First Vision, we read that "a personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of flame, which was spread all

around and yet nothing consumed. Another personage soon appeared like unto the first. He said unto me, ‘Thy sins are forgiven thee.’ He testified also unto me that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”<sup>23</sup>

6. *God the Father has form, shape, and human identity.* Most all Christians in the Prophet’s day believed that God the Father is a spirit, often citing or quoting John 4:24 (“God is a spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth”).<sup>24</sup> Few persons of that day would have spoken of God as a man, and even fewer would do so today. Here is an excerpt from the 39 Articles of Religion of the Church of England (1563): “There is but one living and true God, everlasting, *without body, parts, or passions*; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the Maker, and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there be three Persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost” (emphasis added).

The fourteen-year-old seeker “learned for himself” that God our Heavenly Father is a man—a he, a person, a personage—and that we are created in his image. We might ask, “Did the young Prophet learn in his First Vision that God the Father has a physical, corporeal body?” He certainly may have done so, but Joseph did not mention this specific detail in any of the contemporary accounts that we now have.

On the one hand, it may be that Joseph Smith simply *did not* understand the physical nature of God the Father as a result of the First Vision. His knowledge of the Almighty—like that of all mortals—was acquired incrementally, and his development in doctrinal understanding was thereby accomplished precept upon precept. Joseph would certainly not know and understand in 1820 what he would by the time of his death in 1844. The earliest reference in a sermon by Joseph on the corporeality of God, now in our possession, seems to be January 5, 1841. On that occasion William Clayton recorded the Prophet as saying, “That which is without body or parts is nothing. There is no other God in heaven but that God who has flesh and bones.”<sup>25</sup>

Six weeks later, “Joseph said concerning the Godhead [that] it was not as many imagined—three heads and but one body; he said the three were separate bodies.”<sup>26</sup> On March 9, 1841, he declared that “the Son had a tabernacle and so had the Father.”<sup>27</sup> Finally, it was on April 2, 1843, in Ramus, Illinois, that Brother Joseph delivered instructions on the matter that are the basis for Doctrine and Covenants 130:22–23: “The Father has a body of flesh and

bones as tangible as man's; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost . . . is a personage of Spirit."<sup>28</sup>

The other possibility, of course, is that Joseph Smith *did* in fact know of God's corporeality much earlier than we have supposed. It's fascinating to consider that while involved in his inspired translation of Genesis (November–December 1830), Joseph dictated the following, which is now part of the Book of Moses: "And this was the book of the generations of Adam, saying: In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him; *in the image of his own body*, male and female created he them" (Moses 6:8–9; JST, Genesis 6:9; emphasis added).

The late professor Milton V. Backman brought to light a description of the beliefs of the Latter-day Saints by a Protestant clergyman in Ohio—Truman Coe, a Presbyterian minister who had for four years lived among the Saints in Kirtland. Coe published the following regarding the beliefs of the Latter-day Saints in the August 11, 1836, *Ohio Observer*: "They contend that the God worshipped by the Presbyterians and all other sectarians is no better than a wooden god. *They believe that the true God is a material being, composed of body and parts*; and that when the Creator formed Adam in his own image, he made him about the size and shape of God himself."<sup>29</sup> If a minister of another faith had declared as early as 1836 that the Latter-day Saints were teaching that God has a body, it is not inconceivable that such things were known by Joseph early on, perhaps even from the time of the Sacred Grove.

Church leaders in the twentieth century certainly taught that in the grove Joseph learned that God has a physical body. At the time of the centennial celebration of the First Vision, the April 1920 *Improvement Era* contained messages from several Church leaders about the importance of that vision to the Saints and to the world. Note the following from President Charles W. Penrose, second counselor in the First Presidency: "Never before, so far as history has recorded, was Deity this fully manifested. The Father and the Son as distinct and separate personalities, spiritual, but *tangible beings in human form*, the Holy Spirit emanating from them as light and life and witness of their divinity to the soul of the inspired youth seeking after God! *No mere immaterial, bodiless, incomprehensible abstractions were they or either of them, but real, actual beings, with form and feature and individuality, the Father, and his Son each in the majesty and unity of exalted, perfected, and glorified humanity*. The great truth was made plain that God did literally make man 'in his own likeness' and that Christ Jesus was 'the express image of his person.'"<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, Elder Joseph Fielding Smith observed that “When Joseph Smith went in the woods to pray, just one hundred years ago, he received a revelation of knowledge, truth and power, which has been of inestimable value and blessing to the world. What was revealed to him there was given for the overthrow of false creeds and traditions of the ages and led ultimately to the restoration of the everlasting gospel as revealed by our Redeemer during his ministry. . . . The vision of Joseph Smith made it clear that *the Father and the Son are separate personages, having bodies as tangible as the body of man*. . . . This all-important truth staggered the world.”<sup>31</sup>

7. *The Father and the Son are separate and distinct persons, distinct beings, distinct Gods.* Let’s look carefully at an excerpt from the Athanasian Creed (late 400s to early 500s):

What quality the Father has, the Son has, and the Holy Spirit has. The Father is uncreated, the Son is uncreated, the Holy Spirit is uncreated. The Father is immeasurable, the Son is immeasurable, the Holy Spirit is immeasurable. The Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, the Holy Spirit is eternal. And yet *there are not three eternal beings; there is but one eternal being*. So too there are not three uncreated or immeasurable beings; there is but one uncreated and immeasurable being. Similarly, *the Father is almighty, the Son is almighty, the Holy Spirit is almighty. Yet there are not three almighty beings; there is but one almighty being* (emphasis added).

The large majority of Christians in the nineteenth century would have been brought up on the concept of the “ontological oneness” of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—that they are three separate persons but *one being*.<sup>32</sup> This is an integral part of the doctrine of the Trinity, as accepted by hundreds of millions of Christians throughout the world today. To suggest to a minister or priest—then or now—that God our Heavenly Father “has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s” (Doctrine and Covenants 130:22) and that the Father and the Son are separate beings and separate Gods would invite argument, ridicule, and even cries of heresy and blasphemy.

The wedge that was driven between traditional Christianity and Latter-day Saint Christianity dates to the spring of 1820. “The First Vision was a challenge to the religious vagaries of the day,” Elder John A. Widtsoe wrote. “It shattered many a false doctrine taught throughout the centuries. Yet it was plain and simple to the human understanding. There was no mysticism about it. . . . Further, the vision challenges the contradictory and confusing conceptions of the nature of God. For centuries men had thought, talked, and philosophized about the nature of God, not only his powers but the essence



of him, without reaching an agreement. . . . The result was unutterable confusion to the rational mind.”<sup>33</sup>

In offering a Latter-day Saint response to the doctrine of the Trinity, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught, “We believe these three divine persons constituting a single Godhead are united in purpose, in manner, in testimony, in mission. We believe Them to be filled with the same godly sense of mercy and love, justice and grace, patience, forgiveness, and redemption. I think it is accurate to say we believe They are one in every significant and eternal aspect *except* believing Them to be three persons combined in one substance, a Trinitarian notion not set forth in the scriptures because it is not true.”<sup>34</sup>

It is not unimportant that only eleven days before his death, the Prophet Joseph stated that “I have always declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and that the Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and a spirit: and these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods.”<sup>35</sup>

8. *The Lord would soon begin a grand Restoration, and young Joseph would be the instrument through whom God would initiate this “restitution of all things” foreseen by the ancients (Acts 3:21).* This would be a new gospel dispensation in which, as the Apostle Paul wrote, God would “gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth, even in him” (Ephesians 1:10). From the Wentworth Letter (1842): “They [the first two members of the Godhead] 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 fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known unto me.*”<sup>36</sup>

The Restoration would entail the return of spiritual gifts, including new visions, new doctrinal truths, new conferrals of priesthood authority. In referring to one of the great blessings of the Restoration, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are often heard to say that “the heavens are no longer sealed.” Let’s be clear on this matter. The Saints are aware that men and women of other faiths, noble and God-fearing persons throughout the earth, seek to know the will of the Almighty so that they can carry it out. They strive to be guided and led by his Holy Spirit, and to the extent that they are true to the light they possess, they do in fact receive the Lord’s divine guidance. God loves all of his children and “is no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34). In saying that “the heavens are no longer sealed,” Latter-day Saints

mean that *institutional revelation*, revelation needed to guide the Church of Jesus Christ through apostles and prophets, has been restored. That is, revelation comes once again to and through his ordained apostles, the foundation of the Savior's Church (see Ephesians 2:19–20).

In addition, by and through the power of the Holy Ghost—which gift comes only through the laying on of hands of those holding the Melchizedek Priesthood—members of the restored Church may and should seek for and obtain individual inspiration, personal revelation for their lives and those under their care or direction. In the words of the choice Seer, “We believe that we have a right to revelations, visions, and dreams from God, our Heavenly Father; and light and intelligence, through the gift of the Holy Ghost, in the name of Jesus Christ, on all subjects pertaining to our spiritual welfare; if it so be that we keep the commandments, so as to render ourselves worthy in his sight.”<sup>37</sup>

President Russell M. Nelson, a twenty-first century prophet and rightful successor to Joseph Smith, offered both a prophetic word and significant counsel: “Our Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, will perform some of His mightiest works between now and when He comes again. “We will see miraculous indications that God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, preside over this Church in majesty and glory. But in coming days, it will not be possible to survive spiritually without the guiding, directing, comforting, and constant influence of the Holy Ghost. My beloved brothers and sisters, I plead with you to increase your spiritual capacity to receive revelation.”<sup>38</sup>

9. *Joseph Smith encountered and became acquainted with a God who is personal, approachable, and knowable.* Twentieth century Christian theologian Emil Brunner voiced what would have been repeated and believed many, many times in the early nineteenth century. He wrote of the great divide between God and humankind: “There is no greater sense of distance than that which lies in the words Creator-Creation. Now this is the first and fundamental thing which can be said about man: He is a creature, and as such he is separated by an abyss from the Divine manner of being. The greatest dissimilarity between two things which we can express at all—more dissimilar than light and darkness, death and life, good and evil—is that between the Creator and that which is created.”<sup>39</sup>

It is only natural for those who believe that God and humanity are basically of a different race, a different species, to also believe that God is *impassible*, meaning incapable of emotions or feeling pain. Another related

teaching that arose in the early Christian centuries that broadened and deepened the God-man chasm was the doctrine of *human depravity*. That distance between sinless Deity and sinful and depraved humanity certainly persisted, and perhaps even expanded, by Joseph Smith's day. Thankfully, Joseph Smith was charged to restore a correct knowledge of God and humanity.

Joseph learned in the grove that God knows his children by name, one by one, for the first word spoken to the fourteen-year-old boy was his first name—"Joseph." Some three thousand years before Christ, the prophet Enoch beheld with surprise that God wept for his wandering children. "How is it thou canst weep," Enoch asked, "seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity?" Still, Enoch humbly acknowledged, "thou art there, and thy bosom is there; and also thou art just; thou art merciful and kind forever" (Moses 7:29–30). The scriptures of the Restoration attest that God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ are in the business of people, as Moses learned on an unnamed mountain: "For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39). Another way of saying this is to state that God's infinity does not preclude his immediacy or his intimacy.

"God not only numbers the stars and knows their names," Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught, "but, more importantly, He knows us and our names, and He can heal our hearts and treat our wounds. Though wide-eyed with wonder, we, being His spirit children, are not aliens in His universe."<sup>40</sup> President Dieter F. Uchtdorf uttered a profound truth when he taught, "While we may look at the vast expanse of the universe and say, 'What is man in comparison to the glory of creation?' God Himself said we are the reason He created the universe! . . . This is a paradox of man: compared to God, man is nothing; yet we are everything to God."<sup>41</sup>

10. *Joseph Smith's quest for the truth, including the salvation of his own soul, provides a pattern for how to approach God and receive answers.* Let's take a moment and reflect on how young Joseph Smith was able to penetrate the veil and behold the first two members of the Godhead. First, he searched the scriptures. In an interview, William Smith, younger brother of the Prophet, stated that Reverend George Lane preached a sermon on "which church should I join" and focused on James 1:5. Deeply moved by what he heard, Joseph returned home and searched the Bible to find that particular passage.<sup>42</sup>

There is no more moving and descriptive statement regarding the power of pondering as that contained in the Prophet's own words: "Never did any

passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did, for how to act I did not know, and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had, I would never know” (Joseph Smith—History 1:12). The message of James 1:5 “was cheering information to [Joseph],” Elder Orson Pratt concluded, “tidings that gave him great joy. It was like a light shining forth in a dark place, to guide him to the path in which he should walk.”<sup>43</sup>

Notice that Joseph reflected on the scriptural words again and again; he had confidence in the word of God, and so this was no superficial inquiry. Young Joseph took an idea, an expression written sometime around AD 50 and “likened it” to himself; he appropriately wrenched James’s words from their original New Testament context, sensing that they had specific reference, relevance, and application to a farm boy in 1820 in upstate New York.

Most important, Joseph went to God in prayer. “I immediately went out into the woods where my father had a clearing, and went to the stump where I had struck my axe when I had quit work, and I kneeled down, and prayed, saying, ‘O Lord, what Church shall I join.’ Directly I saw a light, and then a glorious personage in the light, and then another personage, and the first personage said [of] the second, ‘Behold my beloved Son, hear him.’”<sup>44</sup>

President Nelson posed a simple but deeply significant question to the Latter-day Saints:

How can we become the men and women—the Christlike servants—the Lord needs us to be? How can we find answers to questions that perplex us? If Joseph Smith’s transcendent experience in the Sacred Grove teaches us anything, it is that the heavens are open and that God speaks to His children.

The Prophet Joseph Smith set a pattern for us to follow in resolving our questions. Drawn to the promise of James that if we lack wisdom we may ask of God, the boy Joseph took his question directly to Heavenly Father. *He sought personal revelation, and his seeking opened this last dispensation.*

In like manner, what will your seeking open for you? What wisdom do you lack? What do you feel an urgent need to know or understand? Follow the example of the Prophet Joseph. Find a quiet place where you can regularly go. Humble yourself before God. Pour out your heart to your Heavenly Father. Turn to Him for answers and for comfort.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

One brief comment made by the Prophet Joseph as a part of his 1838 account speaks volumes. “He [Jesus Christ] again forbade me to join with any of them.” Now, note what follows: “And *many other things did he say unto me, which I cannot write at this time*” (Joseph Smith—History 1:20). How expansive is that remark! We do not know how long Joseph Smith was caught up into vision with God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son. Was it moments? Did it take hours?

However long the duration of the transcendent experience was, we can rest assured that enough was said and heard to prepare young Joseph Smith for the monumental task that lay before him. Further, we can be certain, as Orson Pratt stated, that God “revealed as much as Joseph was capacitated to receive. The Lord dealt with this young man as parents do when they wish to instruct their children on any subject. Wise parents do not pour out volumes of instruction on the children all at once, but rather they impart to them according to their capacity.” The Lord “imparted enough to let him know that the whole Christian world was without authority.”<sup>46</sup>

Speaking at the Carthage Jail on the 150th anniversary of the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, President Howard W. Hunter declared, “Joseph Smith’s greatness consists of one thing—the truthfulness of his declaration that he saw the Father and the Son and that he responded to the reality of that divine revelation.”<sup>47</sup> President Gordon B. Hinckley observed that Joseph Smith’s First Vision “is *the pivotal thing in our story*. Every claim that we make concerning divine authority, every truth that we offer concerning the validity of this work, all finds its root in the First Vision of the boy prophet. *Without it we would not have anything much to say*. This was the great curtain-raiser on the dispensation of the fullness of times, when God promised he would restore all the power, the gifts, the blessings, of all great dispensations in one great summing up.”<sup>48</sup>

Some years ago, my colleague Joseph Fielding McConkie wrote, “Had Joseph Smith sought answers in the Bible, instead of on his knees in a quiet grove, we would still be waiting for the restoration of the gospel promised in the Bible. . . . Our responsibility is to teach investigators to pray and to show them how answers come. The well-trained missionary,” and that certainly includes member missionaries, “will answer investigators’ questions by *finding the simplest and most direct route to the Sacred Grove*.”<sup>49</sup>



A humorous but instructive account of an experience of Elder Matthew Cowley illustrates the spiritual power that accompanies an earnest expression of belief in and loyalty toward the Restoration, which of course began with the First Vision. “I was called on a mission,” Elder Cowley begins. “And I will never forget the prayers of my father the day that I left. I have never heard a more beautiful blessing in all my life. Then his last words to me at the railroad station, ‘My boy, you will go out on that mission; you will study; you will try to prepare your sermons; and sometimes when you are called upon, you will think you are wonderfully prepared, but when you stand up, your mind will go completely blank.’ I have had that experience more than once.” Elder Cowley then asked his father what he should do in such instances.

His father replied, “You stand up there and with all the fervor of your soul, you bear witness that Joseph Smith was a prophet of the living God, and thoughts will flood into your mind and words to your mouth, to round out those thoughts in a facility of expression that will carry conviction to the heart of everyone who listens.’ And so my mind, being mostly blank during my five years in the mission field, gave me the opportunity to bear testimony to the [First Vision]. Try it some time. . . . If you don’t have anything else to say, testify that Joseph Smith was the prophet of God, and the whole history of the Church will flood into your mind . . . if you will but bear testimony that the prophet was indeed a servant of God and an instrument in his hands.”<sup>50</sup>

President Benson put things into perspective. He testified that when the Father and the Son “appeared to the boy prophet, Joseph Smith, it is not something that concerns only a handful of people. *It is a message and a revelation intended for all of our Father’s children living upon the face of the earth.* It is the greatest event that ever happened in this world since the resurrection of the Master.”<sup>51</sup>

---

## Notes

1. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003), 93.
2. Ezra Taft Benson, *God, Family, Country: Our Three Great Loyalties* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 57; emphasis added.
3. The contemporary accounts drawn upon in this article are (1) Joseph Smith’s 1832 account, a part of his earliest history; (2) the Prophet’s 1835 account, part of a report of a conversation Joseph had with a man by the name of Robert Matthias (or Matthews); (3) the official, canonized account (1838) found in Joseph Smith—History 1:5–20; (4) Orson Pratt’s 1840 account, the first published account, in Scotland; (5) the Wentworth

Letter (1842), written by Joseph to John Wentworth, editor of the *Chicago Democrat*; (6) Orson Hyde's 1842 account, a part of a pamphlet written while Elder Hyde was laboring in Germany; (7) an 1843 account of an interview of the Prophet by David Nye White, editor of the *Pittsburg Weekly Gazette*; and (8) an 1844 account by Alexander Neibaur, a Jewish convert from England who heard Joseph relate the story of his vision. I have taken the liberty to correct punctuation and spelling within the accounts. These accounts may be found in the "Gospel Topics" essays, as well as Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith's First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 31–66; also Robert L. Millet, *I Saw a Pillar of Light: Sacred, Saving Truths from Joseph Smith's First Vision* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2020), 129–39.

4. Jonathan Edwards, *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin* (1757), 357.
5. Alexander Campbell, ed., *The Christian Baptist*, 7 vols., 13th ed., rev. D. S. Burnet (Bethany, WV: H. S. Bosworth, 1861), 1:33.
6. Quoted in Milton V. Backman Jr., *American Religions and the Rise of Mormonism*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 241.
7. "Joseph Smith's Accounts of the First Vision," The Joseph Smith Papers.
8. In the Wentworth Letter (the 1842 account), Joseph explained that if he "went to one society, they referred me to one plan, and another to another; each one pointing to his own particular creed as the *summum bonum* of perfection. Considering that . . . God could not be the author of such confusion, I determined to investigate the subject more fully."
9. "Orson Hyde, *Ein Ruf aus der Wüste* (*A Cry out of the Wilderness*), 1842, extract, English translation, page 1," The Joseph Smith Papers.
10. Letter to Isaac Galland, March 22, 1839; in *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 457–58.
11. Joseph Smith, Journal, October 15, 1843; Joseph Smith History, vol. E-1, 1754–55 (October 1843).
12. Cited in J. I. Packer and Thomas C. Oden, eds., *One Faith: The Evangelical Consensus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 42.
13. Letter to the Church, ca. March 1834.
14. *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 254–56.
15. Richard J. Mouw, *Talking with Mormons: An Invitation to Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 65–67.
16. "A Joseph Smith for the Twenty-First Century," *Brigham Young University Studies* 40, no. 3 (2001): 167–68; emphasis added; see also Richard Lyman Bushman, *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 274.
17. Journal of Alexander Neibaur, May 24, 1844, Church History Library.
18. "Orson Hyde, *Ein Ruf aus der Wüste*," emphasis added.
19. Barna, "Most American Christians Do Not Believe That Satan or the Holy Ghost Exist," April 13, 2009, barna.com.
20. Anne Hendershott, "What, the Devil?" *Catholic World Report*, September 8, 2017.
21. Clyde J. Williams, ed., *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 11.
22. "History, circa Summer 1832," The Joseph Smith Papers, punctuation and spelling corrected; emphasis added.
23. "History, 1834–1836," The Joseph Smith Papers, punctuation corrected.

24. The actual translation from the Greek is “God is spirit. . . .” The Joseph Smith Translation of that verse is “For unto such God hath promised his Spirit. And they who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth” (JST, John 4:26).

25. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, ed. (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 60.

26. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 63.

27. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 64.

28. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 173.

29. Backman, “Truman Coe’s 1836 Description of Mormonism,” *BYU Studies* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 347, 354; emphasis added.

30. Charles W. Penrose, *Improvement Era*, April 1920.

31. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Improvement Era*, April 1920.

32. There were, of course, exceptions to this statement. David Millard, a minister who organized an Eastern Christian Church, published a pamphlet in 1818 in which he attacked the prevailing view of the Trinity. He undertook a scriptural analysis of the New Testament to prove his point. “The whole tenor of scripture,” he asserted, concurs in the testimony, that Christ is verily the Son of God, as really so as Isaac is the son of Abram.” He further stressed the illogical nature of the Nicæan concept: “Three Gods are not one God, any more than three times one is one or two and one are one: which not only destroys the rules of multiplication and addition, but is flat inconsistency.” *The True Messiah Exalted, or Jesus Christ Really the Son of God, Vindicated; in Three Letters to a Presbyterian Minister* (Canandaigua, 1818), 5–8. William Ellery Channing, the father of Unitarianism, stated in a famous 1819 Baltimore sermon that God can no more be three persons than man can be. *The Works of William E. Channing* (Boston, 1886), 371; cited in Milton V. Backman Jr., *American Religions and the Rise of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 210.

33. John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith: Seeker after Truth, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1951), 5.

34. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Only True God and Jesus Christ Whom He Hath Sent,” *Ensign*, November 2007. See also Carlos E. Asay, “Oh, How Lovely Was the Morning!” *Ensign*, April 1995.

35. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 41–42.

36. “Church History,” 1 March 1842, page 707, The Joseph Smith Papers, emphasis added.

37. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, 132.

38. Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” *Ensign*, May 2018. See also *Teachings of Russell M. Nelson* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2019), 335.

39. Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947), 90.

40. Neal A. Maxwell, *Whom the Lord Loveth: The Journey of Discipleship* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 132.

41. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “You Matter to Him,” *Ensign*, November 2011.

42. See E. C. Briggs and J. W. Peterson, “Another Testimony,” from an interview of William Smith, in *Deseret News*, January 20, 1894; see also Kyle R. Walker, *William B. Smith: In the Shadow of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), 48.

- 
43. "Appendix: Orson Pratt, *A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions*," The Joseph Smith Papers.
  44. "Interview, 21 August 1843, extract," The Joseph Smith Papers.
  45. "Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives," *Ensign*, May 2018; emphasis added.
  46. *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards & Sons, 1851–86), 12:355.
  47. Howard W. Hunter, "Come to the God of All Truth," *Ensign*, September 1994.
  48. *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 226; emphasis added.
  49. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Here We Stand* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 194–95; emphasis added.
  50. Matthew Cowley, "Put Your Hand into the Hand of God" (BYU devotional address, October 20, 1953); emphasis added; see also *Matthew Cowley Speaks* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), 297–98.
  51. Benson, *God, Family, Country*, 57.