

The Doctrine and Covenants: A Roundtable Discussion, Part 2

J. Spencer Fluhman (spencer_fluhman@byu.edu) is an assistant professor of Church history and doctrine at BYU.

Steven C. Harper (stevenharper@byu.edu) is an associate professor of Church history and doctrine and an editor of The Joseph Smith Papers.

Richard Neitzel Holzappel (holzappel@byu.edu) is Religious Studies Center publications director.

Grant Underwood (grant_underwood@byu.edu) is a professor of history at BYU and an editor of The Joseph Smith Papers.

Robert J. Woodford (robertwoodford1167@msn.com) is an editor of The Joseph Smith Papers.

Holzappel: If you had children in a Doctrine and Covenants class at BYU–Idaho or BYU–Provo, what is one thing you would hope they would get out of the class?

Harper: I believe Elder Neal A. Maxwell’s statement that if you listen carefully to the Doctrine and Covenants, you “can almost ‘hear’ [the Savior] talking.”¹ I try to help my students appreciate this by asking if they have ever seen a New Testament with the Savior’s words printed in red letters. Most of them have. I then ask, “If we printed all of our standard works that way, which, percentage-wise, would have the most red text?” The answer, overwhelmingly, is the Doctrine and Covenants. That fact does not diminish the other books; it just helps students get a sense of what they are looking at in the Doctrine and Covenants—the words of the Savior. So I want my loved ones to appreciate what the Explanatory Introduction says, that the Doctrine and Covenants contains “an invitation to all people everywhere.” I would emphasize the inclusive nature of that invitation: *all* people everywhere are to hear the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ and respond to his invitation. Related to that point, I would want myself and my loved ones to come to know Christ by listening to him.

I sometimes worry that we have mistaken assumptions about Christ. I think assumptions can be the enemy of knowledge. If we recognize that assumptions are hypotheses, we can verify them. That is

what Joseph Smith did. Joseph was not satisfied with assumptions, but so many of us are. We assume that we know who Christ is and what he is like, but to listen to him speak for almost 140 sections is a sanctifying yet challenging experience. He does not always sound as we might assume he would. As Christ said in John 17, eternal life is knowing God and his Son, Jesus Christ. I want my children to come to know Christ by listening to his voice. That would be my main message.

Fluhman: I agree. If I were to add to that, I would reinforce to students a point about revelation. Revelation is a process—a process described powerfully in the Doctrine and Covenants. It is not a static or passive experience. It was not that way for Joseph Smith, and it is not that way for any Latter-day Saint. Sometimes we imagine revelation as a mechanical thing. Some might imagine Joseph Smith as a puppet or a ventriloquist’s dummy, but it is not so! If they see the process of revelation as a demanding and dynamic process, my students and my children will see in Joseph Smith not someone who is utterly unlike themselves, but someone who is quite similar to them in important ways.

Oliver Cowdery learned the active, searching nature of revelation the hard way. He learned it through the translation process of the Book of Mormon. The Lord had to say bluntly, “You have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it to you” (D&C 9:7). A passive, mechanical thing is what Oliver expected. It turned out not to be that way. It was more demanding than Oliver had even supposed. I want my children and my students to understand that about themselves, about God, and about prophets and apostles. It is not easier for prophets and apostles—it is as demanding and dynamic a process as it is for us as we seek God’s will in our own lives. The Doctrine and Covenants is such a great place to learn and to teach those lessons about what it means to be a religious person, a spiritual person, a seeker after God, a seeker of truth.

Underwood: Many of our students are surprised when they discover that the revelations as we have them now are not exactly the same as when they were first recorded. They are unaware of the inspired revisions and amplifications made by the Prophet. It is interesting to reflect on commonly held assumptions about the process of receiving scriptural revelations that amount to viewing the Prophet as a human fax machine through which God sends his revelations. How did such views arise? Why are they so popular?

Woodford: I agree with Spencer [Fluhman] that Joseph was not a passive instrument through whom the word of the Lord was transcribed verbatim. Many have criticized the Prophet for revising his texts, believ-

ing that the revelations are word-for-word dictations from the Lord. While some revelations were received via the Urim and Thummim, and others were visions and theophanies, the vast majority, I believe, were received the very same way we receive inspiration today. I believe the principle taught in Moroni 10:5, that it is by the power of the Holy Ghost that we may know the truth of all things. The Prophet received inspiration the same way we do, but he had the added task of writing the revelations for the benefit of the members of the Church.

Underwood: People create an image of the Prophet in their minds, and when the historical Joseph Smith does not match it, they have doubts. The solution is to square our mental images with the facts rather than to sanctify our perceptions. We need to help students distinguish their perceptions, their current understanding, from their testimonies.

Harper: People mistake assumptions for knowledge. So if I say, “Well, I know what a prophet is like,” and then meet one named Joseph Smith and read his documents and find that he does not match the assumption, then what I thought was knowledge has been disproved. Truth has not been disproved—it is my wrong assumption that has been disproved. Critics of Joseph Smith have taken their assumptions as truth, and it is the wrong way to reason. It is not a coherent epistemology or way of knowing. The best way of knowing is the way Joseph modeled for us. Joseph started with a premise, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God” (James 1:5). Joseph could have said, “You know, I believe that, and now I think I’ll stay home and watch the grass grow this morning.” He did not say that. He said, “How to act I did not know” (Joseph Smith—History 1:12). He learned how to act in James 1:5, and then he *acted*. Elder David A. Bednar has emphasized this point in the *Religious Educator*.² Joseph goes and does something. He acts in a way that will verify or disprove the premise.

One of the great things Joseph Smith gives to us is a model on how to get revelations. He does not just get them for us; he shows us how to get them. And we should never be satisfied just to read his revelations and be done with it. We should want to get our own revelations that confirm that his are true. In 2005, when the Library of Congress celebrated the two hundredth anniversary of Joseph Smith’s birth, Elder Dallin H. Oaks emphasized that principle. He called it the principle of “independent verification by revelation.”³ Every single one of those words is important. Independently, we—with no mediators but the Godhead, nothing between us and the Holy Spirit—should verify with our own revelations the truths that Joseph Smith reveals

to us. If that sounds disrespectful or challenging to the prophets, the answer from Joseph Smith and Brigham Young and others is, “No! Get close to the Holy Ghost and get your own confirmation of what we have taught.”

Underwood: I agree with everything that has been said about what we would like our children to take away from a class in the Doctrine and Covenants. One other element I would mention is the evidence in so many of the revelations of a loving, forgiving Heavenly Father. It is so imperative, the way he gives people chances to serve even when he knows that six months later, or six years later, they will fall away. Yet he accords them love and respect. In addition to that, he is so forgiving. How many times do we read some version of, “I forgive your sins”? What I want my kids to see is that Heavenly Father is loving! The notion of God as the stern judge looking down his nose at us from high on his bench is not our understanding. That is not what our revelations portray. In my view, the love of Heavenly Father is more powerfully portrayed in the Doctrine and Covenants than in any other volume of scripture. I love the Book of Mormon; it teaches us about and brings us to Christ in a powerful way. But the very personal love that God has for his individual children cannot be more powerfully taught than it is in the Doctrine and Covenants.

Holzappel: What about the concept of God chastening us?

Harper: Section 95 is so interesting on that point. In the first verse, Christ explains that whom he loves, he chastens. And then the verse ends with him saying, “And I have loved you.” The first word in verse 2 is “wherefore,” and then he lays into them about building the temple. Even that rebuke from God is evidence or a manifestation of his love.

Underwood: Another concept to emphasize is that there are witnesses of the Doctrine and Covenants. We know the Book of Mormon witness story so well; almost any student in your class can just tell you the story. But when it comes to the fact that there are witnesses to the Doctrine and Covenants, some ask, “Why is that important?” Should we emphasize that more?

Woodford: The witnesses originally were those who were at the conference of November 1831 for the Book of Commandments—separate from the Quorum of the Twelve, whose testimony is found in the Explanatory Introduction of the Doctrine and Covenants today. I suspect that we would have had the witness of those who planned for the Book of Commandments had the book ever been completed in the initial printing. I believe it would have been in the back of the

book as was the testimony of the witnesses of the Book of Mormon in the 1830 edition. When the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants was published, it included the testimony of the Quorum of the Twelve, unsigned. But if you read the testimony of the Book of Commandments and the testimony of the Twelve, there is only a slight variation between the two. Joseph Smith received it by revelation, and the Twelve were willing to say that they agreed with that testimony, but it was never signed by those men. The testimony of the Twelve was first included in the *History of the Church* with the signatures added by B. H. Roberts. He wrote a little footnote that he thought it was appropriate to attach their names. Both testimonies were in the introduction to the Doctrine and Covenants from 1921 to 1981; then the Church removed the one from the Book of Commandments, and we now just have the one from the Twelve. But I think the testimony of the Twelve serves the same purpose: these revelations are the word of the Lord. The Holy Ghost has borne witness to us that the words are true.

Harper: The Lord explains in section 17 his logic for calling witnesses, which he did for both the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants. He is not under the illusion that because there are witnesses, everybody is going to believe. He talks about what he calls his “righteous purposes.” Witnesses serve the function of presenting a choice to the hearers or recipients of the revelations. When people declare their witness that these things are true, that witness compels readers to make a choice about it; we have to decide whether we will believe them. We have been made a free agent in that process. So the Lord is compelling us to choose. He is putting the responsibility of choosing whether to believe him squarely on our shoulders and giving us the chance to receive the promised blessings or the punishments, depending on what we do.

Holzappel: *What is the greatest experience you’ve had in your personal study of the Doctrine and Covenants that you can share publicly?*

Woodford: When I was doing research for my dissertation, I had to read negative comments by people critical of the Prophet. One day I sat back in my chair and thought, “Could all of these people be lying about Joseph Smith? Was he really a bad man?” What came to my mind was, “Well, what about the Book of Mormon?” I know that the Book of Mormon is the word of God, and since that time I never had any serious doubts about the Prophet Joseph Smith. Critics can call him anything they like; it does not give me great concern. My testimony is that he is a prophet of God and the head of this dispensation.

Harper: I had an experience with the manuscript that William McLellin copied of section 66, which was directed to him. In trying to make sense of that document, I went to Independence, Missouri, to the Community of Christ archives to read a related letter there. I had swimming around in my head a constellation of documents related to the manuscript of the revelation, the copy of it that McLellin put in his journal for October 29, 1831. Readers may be interested to know that that revelation was received on October 29 in Hiram, Ohio, and the reason we know that is that the McLellin journals are now available. *History of the Church* does not explicitly say, but implies that the revelation was received October 25. The second manuscript I was researching was a letter from Joseph to his wife Emma, written in June of 1832.

When I put these documents together, I knew there was a fascinating story going on, but I could not quite figure it out. For several months I had these pieces of evidence sort of going around in my head, almost like a puzzle. And twist and turn them as I might, I could not make them fit together. I was lying in bed one morning at about two o'clock, and I had an epiphany: I think I know what this revelation meant to William McLellin and what it meant to Joseph Smith. And immediately following that, I had this wave of feeling of empathy for William McLellin that I had not had before. He had traditionally been painted as an apostate, and I shared that sense. I do not excuse him in any way for his apostasy, but now I felt much more empathetic and had this feeling, "There but for the grace of God go I." In other words, I learned from section 66 by likening it to myself, as we have talked about here. For me, cracking into the original intent of that revelation—what it meant to them, there, then—was, at the same time, the key to my being able to get the most meaning out of it for myself, here, now.

I won't go into the details, but I will just say this much: Unbeknownst to Joseph Smith, McLellin asked God five secret questions which God answered in the revelation. Joseph did not ever know what the five questions were. McLellin, of course, became a bitter apostate—an enemy of Joseph Smith. But for the rest of his life, he testified in his own newspaper, "I to this day consider it to me an evidence I cannot refute."⁴

Even more meaningful than that for me was an experience I had in the mission field. My companion and I were asked to visit a woman who was struggling with serious depression. We accompanied the missionaries who were seeing her to her house. I had no special things to

say, and neither did my companion, so we just tried to have something in mind or be open to the Spirit. I am not sure exactly how, but we ended up in section 18 of the Doctrine and Covenants. We read out loud with her, “Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God; For, behold, the Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh; wherefore he suffered the pain of all men, that all men might repent and come unto him. . . . And how great is his joy in the soul that repenteth!” (D&C 18:10–11, 13). I remember teaching those verses—I am sure it was the first time in my life that I had ever taught them—and simultaneously learning from them. You know what that experience is like. The Holy Spirit was with us for the sake of this woman.

I remember a line of questioning we put to this woman, and as we did, it was the first time I had thought about these questions or the implications of them for myself. I remember asking her that if she was the only one who ever needed redemption and an Atonement, would Christ do it? Did she think it would be worth it to Christ? She thought for a minute, and she said, “Yes.” And she was right. The Book of Mormon emphasizes an infinite Atonement. An infinite Atonement is just as extensive for one person needing redemption as for eight hundred billion people in need of redemption. That text more than any other, I think, drives home the point, as Elder Ballard recently emphasized in conference, about the Savior’s concern for the one and the value of the Atonement for one.

I like to think of those verses as an equation: The worth of a soul is great in the sight of God. If we had to write a mathematical equation to describe the worth of a soul, based on those verses, I think we could say with the Book of Mormon’s help in describing the Atonement as infinite, that a soul to God is equal to the infinite Atonement of the Only Begotten Son of God. I believe that. I believe that is the doctrine of section 18, wonderfully supported by section 19. In other words, the doctrine of the Atonement flowing out of these revelations is my most cherished experience with them.

Fluhman: Mine is an experience from before I was ever a serious scholar or teacher of the Doctrine and Covenants. In a way, mine mirrors Steve’s experience as a young missionary. I found myself being asked to train an even younger missionary in the middle of nowhere, a little tiny town in western Maryland, when the biggest snowstorm in a hundred years hit us. We could not do anything. It was as miserable a time as I have ever had. I was just overwhelmed with discouragement and with all sorts of questions, and I was still trying to sort through the beginnings of a set of convictions about God and the Church and

everything else. In the midst of that very depressing, gray winter, out of desperation, I decided to get up a little bit earlier to read all the way through the Doctrine and Covenants for the first time.

That deep winter in the middle of the Allegheny Mountains offers one of the most poignant memories of my life. Morning after morning, as the sun was coming up over those mountains, I sat alone in the little front room of our apartment, grappling with the revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants for the first time. I experienced finding hope where I had had none, faith where I could not muster it before, love for people that I was not inclined to love—all those dramatic changes of heart that many can now look back on in their own lives. For me, that real transformative period of my life came because of my study of the Doctrine and Covenants. Ever since then, I have had a special affection and a relationship with those revelations that still drive my scholarship, still propel my study, and still demand my commitment of time.

Underwood: I would focus on my recent period working with *The Joseph Smith Papers*. This has been an opportunity to go back and engage the earliest surviving copies and records of that revelatory moment, or a series of revelatory moments that the Prophet experienced, and it has given a tangibility and a reality to the revelations that has enriched prior understanding. Previously, most of my reading—as I would imagine it is for most Latter-day Saints—had been focused on, “How might this text bless and enrich my life or my current circumstance?” In addition to applying those revelations to your current situation, it is exhilarating and exciting to feel like you are almost there, touching the footprint of God in the 1830s. That is the impact this project has had on me. It has given a realism and a vitality to the revelations that add to my earlier appreciation.

Woodford: The revelations were preserved, for the most part, in two manuscript books before they were published as the Book of Commandments and then the Doctrine and Covenants. The first of these was called “A Book of Commandments and Revelations,” and the second is commonly known as the “Kirtland Revelation Book.” The Book of Commandments and Revelations was taken by Oliver Cowdery and John Whitmer to Missouri in 1831 to publish the Book of Commandments. That is when they began recording revelations in the second volume, starting with what is now D&C 76. It would be fascinating to have the original manuscripts of the revelations, but, unfortunately, there are only a few of them that we can positively identify. We suppose that many of the originals were discarded once the published volumes were available. The revelations we have in these

two manuscript books are prepublication manuscripts, and it is thrilling to view them in the handwriting of John Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, Frederick G. Williams, Sidney Rigdon, and others, with corrections by these same men and Joseph Smith.

Holzappel: May I ask you a question? Joseph Smith was commanded by the angel to go find the plates and to translate them. There is no question about what he was supposed to do there. There were the plates and the Urim and Thummim. The whole process of what he needed to do was laid out for him. Why, all of a sudden, did he start writing down the revelations?

Harper: I wouldn't say it was all of a sudden. I would say it was quite gradual. His revelation of the First Vision was not written down for a dozen years. As far as we can tell, the first revelation to be recorded was section 3.

Holzappel: I mean why all of a sudden on a certain day did he decide, "I'm going to write this revelation down"? What initiated him to say, "You know, I should write this down"?

Woodford: Ron Barney has got an interesting idea on that. In the summer of 1830, the Prophet and John Whitmer sat down to copy the revelations and put them together. Ron thinks that is when some of the revelations were originally recorded.

Harper: In which case, the catalyst may be section 21 in the Doctrine and Covenants: "Behold, there shall be a record kept among you" (v. 1).

Fluhman: Another catalyst may have been the first four verses of Doctrine and Covenants 18, which contains the commandment for Oliver to rely upon the Book of Mormon manuscript to prepare a kind of foundational document for the restored Church.

Woodford: We feel that it was reasonably close to June of 1829 that Oliver, in response to that opening portion of section 18, started writing down a document similar to what later became section 20, the Articles and Covenants of the Church.

Holzappel: This raises the question, "Why was section 3 written down when earlier ones may not have been?" One could postulate that Joseph might have received other divine communications that he did not choose to record in the same way that he did section 3 and onward. There I think we go to a slightly different question, "What is it about the content of section 3 that makes the experience so profound?" We imagine the incredible setback of losing the first portion of the Book of Mormon translation. The Prophet had been working on this for months. This loss was catastrophe number one in the beginning of the Restoration.

Harper: Surely Lucy Mack Smith's remembrance points that out.

Underwood: Exactly. And if anything might elicit a profound and reassuring communication from the Lord, it would have been that event. God said, “Yes, you were irresponsible; I’ll beat you with a few stripes and you’ll suffer an affliction for a season.” But afterward, here’s that loving, kind Heavenly Father saying, “You’re still Joseph, my prophet. This work will go forth.” How could Joseph not be reassured and uplifted by that?

Harper: As far as I could tell from historical records, section 3 is the first time Joseph speaks in the prophetic voice. Look at the last few verses of that revelation. He had gone into the grove in 1820 as a humble teenager and by the time he was done with section 3, he was a prophet speaking on behalf of the Lord, declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ to the house of Israel so that through it they can repent and be saved. He set forth the gospel like a prophet. Section 3 became a turning point for him.

Section 3 is a beautiful revelation—it is twenty verses long, and right at the midway point is where we see a dramatic tone change. The Lord lambasts Joseph in the first ten verses for losing the 116 pages. In verse 4, it says, “Whoever sets at naught the counsels of God . . . must fall and incur the vengeance of a *just* God.” And then verse 10 says, “But remember, God is *merciful*.” The second half of the revelation is in the voice of a merciful God, saying, “Repent of that which thou hast done, and thou art still chosen, and art again called to the work” (v. 10). It is one of the most beautiful texts in the whole world.

Holzappel: *Let’s finish up with this. It’s often easier to accept the dead prophets of the Bible and the Book of Mormon. Nephi is dead, so he is on a pedestal. But in the 1830s, the members had to exercise faith in a living prophet. The acceptance of the Doctrine and Covenants to me is more singular than accepting the Book of Mormon, because here was a man who had to use the outhouse. The early members saw him when he had not shaved. They saw him maybe a little cross with his children or his wife or impatient with people around him. Joseph Smith was profoundly young. He was getting revelation. At the November 1831 conference, they were willing to accept this living person as a prophet. I am not saying it wasn’t hard accepting dead prophets, but they were all safely dead. Joseph was a man who struggled to be a disciple as much as anyone else. Do you perceive a change in the willingness of members to move from accepting the Book of Mormon to accepting the Doctrine and Covenants?*

Fruhman: Grant’s research demonstrates that the first-generation Latter-day Saints did not know the Book of Mormon very well, nor did they preach from it very often; but they were more likely than not to

call attention to it as the signal witness of Joseph Smith's prophetic call. And, in a sense, the book signified Joseph Smith's mission. For many of those early Saints who accepted the Book of Mormon as scripture, there was a certain logic that predisposed them to see Joseph Smith as an instrument in the hands of God. So we have more work to do in understanding exactly what the Saints thought and how they connected things.

Harper: There are several early Latter-day Saints who accepted and endured in their acceptance of the Book of Mormon but later stopped believing in Joseph's revelations—David Whitmer, William McLellin, John Corrill, and others. For myself I cannot separate the two; if I believe in the Book of Mormon, then I believe in the later revelations. My own conclusion and conviction is that the same testimony I have of the Book of Mormon carries through and testifies to me of the later revelations as well.

Martin Harris believed Joseph was a prophet. He was worried about losing a lot of money. He came to Joseph in a panic that the Book of Mormon was not selling. "I need a commandment!" he demanded, "I want a revelation." Joseph says, "Well, you got section 5. The Lord told you there what you needed to do." But still Martin demands another revelation. So here is a man twice as old as Joseph, prosperous and respectable. He does not want to hear Joseph Smith the farmer giving advice; he wants a commandment from God. Where does he go to get it? To Joseph Smith the seer, and when that commandment, section 19, comes it is more stinging, more pointed than anything Joseph ever said, and Harris tries his best to follow it. And this leads to a point I try to make to my students. To sum it up in a simple way, those who knew Joseph best believed him most. Most of the newspaper editors did not believe him and mocked him, and all kinds of people poked fun at him and believed in their minds he was a fraud. What about his wife? What about his mother? My mom would know if I were a seer or not. My wife would know if I translated the Book of Mormon by the power of God or not. What do the people who know Joseph best—Martin Harris, John Whitmer—believe about his revelations? They move from place to place, sacrifice farms, and whatever else because the revelations say so. That is a compelling historical point to me.

Underwood: There have been individuals who have felt that at some point in history, Joseph became a fallen prophet, that he was no longer the conduit for divine revelation. But many never questioned him. They embraced the gospel from day one and never looked back. This says a lot about the faith and religiosity of so many of the early

Saints. We all try to live the gospel, try to obey its precepts and serve in our callings; but the constant, deep pursuit of godliness and religious devotion that is manifest in many of the early diaries, letters, and histories shows that these people were almost mystical in their spirituality. It seemed natural for these spiritually prepared individuals to accept Joseph. And mind you, in many cases, these folks had a fair knowledge of Christian history and knew that often God's spokesmen have been young. Finally, consider that there is in humanity a spark of divinity. If it is not stifled, it can recognize inspiration from whatever quarter. We tend to experience something of the same phenomenon in the Church today. We usually believe that our bishop or the stake president is speaking God's will to us. We embrace their words as inspired until proven otherwise. We give our leaders the benefit of the doubt. That testifies to the depth of devotion on the part of so many ordinary Latter-day Saints to hear and receive the word of God however he chooses to send it. **RE**

Notes

1. Neal A. Maxwell, "The Doctrine and Covenants: The Voice of the Lord," *Ensign*, December 1978, 4.

2. David A. Bednar, "Seek learning by Faith," *Religious Educator* 7, no. 3 (2006): 1–11.

3. Dallin H. Oaks, "Joseph Smith in a Personal World," in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute at Brigham Young University, 2006).

4. Quoted in Steven C. Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 229.