

The First Vision, by Del Parson, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Joseph Smith's initial theophany portrayed a fundamental spiritual pattern that all members of the Church—indeed, all people of the world—need to and can follow.

Entrenching a Fundamental: Use of the First Vision in General Conference

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When President Gordon B. Hinckley declared in the October 2002 general conference that the strength of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints “rests on the validity” of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,¹ most people in the congregation likely felt that he was only affirming a basic tenet of the Restoration—but this unique theophany was not always so prominent. Not until the mid-1960s did scholars and historians affiliated with the Church begin a more thorough exploration of the historical emergence of Joseph Smith’s 1820 theophany, now known as the First Vision, and its subsequent elevation in the spiritual consciousness and didactic usage of leaders and members of the Church. This has led some to consider how increasing exposure to and familiarity with this foundational theophany shaped, and continues to shape, the development of Latter-day Saint doctrine and beliefs from the 1840s onward.

For example, in 1980, James Allen observed, “It is worth noting that Joseph Smith himself never used the First Vision to illustrate his own expanded teachings about God. It appears, in fact, that he seldom referred to it at all, except in private conversation, even after it was published. But

the fact that it was published provided a ready tool that his followers would later use in every conceivable way” to teach about myriad gospel-related topics.² Allen then identified twenty-eight significant teachings highlighted by Latter-day Saint teachers, writers, and leaders from the narrative of the First Vision since the canonization of the 1838–56 account³ in 1880. Prime among these were five themes noted nearly a century earlier by Elder B. H. Roberts in 1893.⁴ These themes were (1) God is an embodied personage, in whose image we are created; (2) the distinctness of the Father and the Son as separate beings; (3) confirmation of the Great Apostasy; (4) revelation has not ceased; and (5) God lives and has modern testators of his reality. Many of the twenty-eight significant teachings Allen identified were either directly correlated with or could reasonably be subcategorized within Roberts’s five main themes. The first main purpose of this paper will be to document the degree to which speakers at the general conferences of the Church over the last 140 years have continued to emphasize these five themes or categories.

Allen also noted that two of the teachings he identified seemed to be gaining momentum, and he projected that these themes would become more prominent in the coming decades. A second purpose of this paper will be to examine the degree to which these two additional themes, or categories, identified by Allen in 1980 have gained traction among general conference speakers in the last 40 years.

Finally, in our research,⁵ we identified another emerging theme that has become increasingly prominent in the last few decades. Thus we report on the emergence of this theme or category as well. All eight of these themes or categories emphasize powerful truths that demonstrate the profound theological, ecclesiastical, and personal implications of the First Vision and its continuing transformative impact for members of the Church particularly, as well as for the entire world.

Brief Notes on Methodology

To reasonably limit the scope of this study, our research focused solely on how speakers at general conferences of the Church specifically used the portion of the 1838–56 account now known as Joseph Smith—History 1:15–20 in their messages. This delimits the study to the day of the actual theophany; further studies may produce fruitful insights by focusing on events leading up to the theophany (JS—H 1:1–14) and its immediate aftermath (JS—H 1:21–26).⁶ We also chose to focus only on general conference messages from

October 1880 (when the 1838–56 account of the First Vision was canonized) to April 2020 (the most recent available general conference as of the writing of this article).

The main sources for the research in this project were three databases that contain general conference addresses. The main database was the LDS Scripture Citation Index (LDSCI),⁷ which contains general conference addresses from 1942 to the present. The second database was the collection of Conference Reports available on Archive.org,⁸ which was used to search general conference addresses from October 1897 to October 1949. To find general conference addresses from October 1880 to April 1897, we used the database “Early Church Conference Reports.”⁹

Finding as many instances as possible of when Church leaders referred to the First Vision during general conferences was somewhat complicated. Even though the 1838–56 account of the First Vision account was canonized in the October 1880 general conference, no version existed with chapters and versification until 1902.¹⁰ Joseph Smith—History 1, with its current versification, was first published as such in the 1981 Latter-day Saint edition of the scriptures.¹¹ Accordingly, we determined that the most consistent way for us to identify when Church leaders referred to what we now know as Joseph Smith—History 1 from 1880 to 1949 was to search general conference addresses for fourteen key phrases taken directly from JS—H 1:15–20.¹² From 1950 onward, when Church leaders began to more consistently cite scripture references in their talks, we primarily used the LDSCI database for identifying usage of JS—H 1:15–20 in general conference addresses.¹³ Just to be sure we found as many possible references to Joseph Smith’s foundational theophany in general conference addresses from 1950 to 2020, however, we also searched the talks from 1950 to 2020 in LDSCI using the phrases “First Vision” and “Sacred Grove.” Acknowledging that these methods may have missed a few references to the First Vision by Church leaders in general conference from 1880 to 2020, we feel confident that we have found the vast majority of these references from which to present both quantitative reports and qualitative analysis that will illustrate key transformative aspects of the First Vision, as reiterated by Church leaders during general conference.

Frequency of Usage of JS—H 1:15–20 in General Conference

The following chart shows the number of citations for each verse in this scripture block by decade from October 1880 to October 2019.¹⁴ Each bar on the

graph represents how often each verse in JS—H 1:15–20 was cited during general conference addresses during that decade.¹⁵

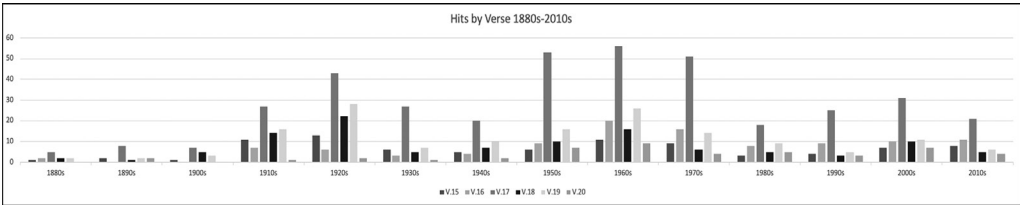


Figure 1. JS—H 1:15–20 citations in general conference by decade

While there is a significant amount of data to examine and discuss here, we will offer just four observations. First, even though the 1838–56 account of the First Vision was officially canonized in 1880 as part of the Pearl of Great Price, general conference speakers still were not referring often to the text of this newly canonized standard work or to the “First Vision” or “Sacred Grove” as often from the 1880s through the 1900s as in subsequent decades. There may be many reasons for this. For example, while Elder Orson Pratt had arranged the Doctrine and Covenants (1876) and Book of Mormon (1879) into chapters and verses, he did not do the same for the 1878 Salt Lake edition of the Pearl of Great Price. Perhaps the lack of versification made the Pearl of Great Price less likely or less convenient to be cited by speakers. Also, the Church did not purchase the Smith family farm and the area now commonly referred to as the Sacred Grove until 1907.¹⁶ Furthermore, despite its nineteenth-century canonization, the First Vision was not commonly thought of or referred to as the inaugural event of the Restoration until after the turn of the century. Therefore, Church members and leaders did not begin to think of the “Sacred Grove” as we do today until around that time.¹⁷

Second, verse 17—the verse that mentions the actual appearance of the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith—is the most frequently cited verse by general conference speakers in every decade, without exception. Referring to this “*unique* and wonderful experience,” President Gordon B. Hinckley pointed out,

In all of recorded religious history *there is nothing to compare with it*. The New Testament recounts the baptism of Jesus when the voice of God was heard and the Holy Ghost descended in the form of a dove. At the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter, James, and John saw the Lord transfigured before them. They heard the voice of the Father, but they did not see Him.

Why did both the Father and the Son come to a boy, a mere lad? For one thing, they came to usher in the greatest gospel dispensation of all time, when all of previous dispensations should be gathered and brought together in one.¹⁸

Given the rarity of this kind of theophany, its formative role in validating the divine calling of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and its part in the developing narrative of the Restoration, the preeminent place of verse 17 among all general conference citations for the First Vision seems appropriate.

Our third observation focuses on verse 19 as the second-most commonly cited verse in this scripture block consistently throughout this 140-year period—with only a few exceptions in specific decades. When citing verse 19, Church leaders generally focus on the Savior’s instruction to the young Joseph to join none of the churches then in existence due to the falseness of their creeds and their “teaching for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.” Because this verse emphasizes the need for a Restoration in light of a universal apostasy, Church leaders’ emphasis on this verse should also come as no surprise.

Our final observation focuses on two notable spikes in the usage of JS—H 1:15–20 over the last 140 years. The first notable increase in references occurred during the 1920s.¹⁹ This was chiefly due to the April 1920 general conference, during which Church leaders cited JS—H 1:15–20 twenty times—more than at any other single general conference from October 1880 to October 2019. Undoubtedly, this was due to 1920 being the centennial commemoration of Joseph Smith’s First Vision. The second increase in citations from the 1950s through the 1970s is intriguing. Not only was the grand theophany itself in verse 17 cited much more often during these decades than in any other three-decade period before or since, but all verses in this scripture block were cited more than in any other thirty-year period, with a total of 339 citations. The next closest thirty-year period was the 1910s–30s, with 239 citations. Whether by design or less intentional inspiration, Church leaders were increasingly referring to Joseph Smith’s First Vision during a time of unprecedented Church growth and during an era that some scholars have referred to as an era of “religious crisis,”²⁰ not only in the United States but around the world as well. Further in-depth studies on the usage of the First Vision during this tumultuous era might yield valuable insights for understanding the powerful transformative impact of the First Vision and its implications.

In addition to researching how often JS—H 1:15–20 was cited during the Church’s general conferences, we also analyzed which speakers cited it most often. The following chart shows how often JS—H 1:15–20 was cited by the calling the speaker held at the time the address was given. Each colored bar on the graph represents the position of the speaker.²¹ The “Other” category includes a variety of speakers such as those without a general Church calling (such as BYU football coach LaVell Edwards, who spoke in the October 1984 general conference), mission presidents, the Presiding Bishopric, and other general officers of the Church (such as Relief Society or Sunday School general presidencies).

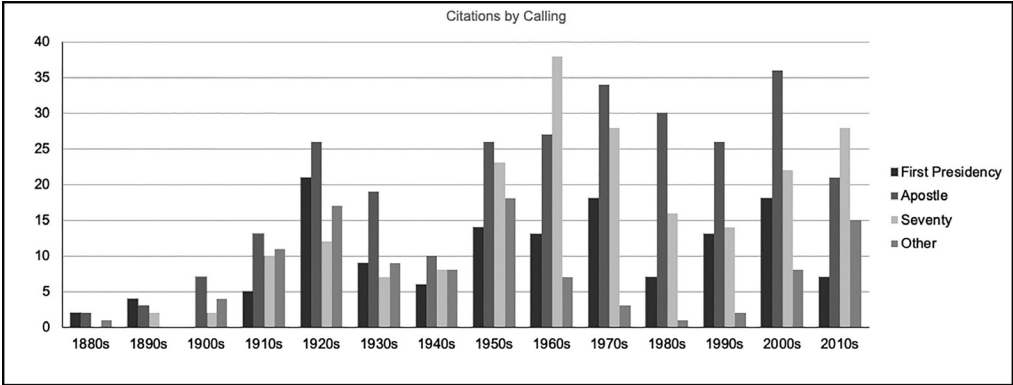


Figure 2. JS—H 1:15–20 citations in general conference by calling by decade

Overall, from the late nineteenth century through the first decade of the twenty-first century, members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (approximately twelve talks per general conference) have cited the First Vision the most with a total of 258 citations. This is followed by the Seventy with 210 citations (as many as 15 talks in one conference we surveyed, but in recent years closer to 6–8 talks per conference). The First Presidency (who speak approximately six to eight times during a typical general conference) have cited the First Vision 137 times; Presidents of the Church account for more than 40 percent of these references among the First Presidency. Those in the “Other” category have referred to JS—H 1:15–20 a total of ninety-three times (this group gives the fewest number of talks per general conference, usually around three to four). Thus, in the 138 general conferences of the Church from 1880 through 2019, members of the Church heard Church leaders refer

to the First Vision an average of five times per year, with nearly three of these coming from the fifteen men they sustain as prophets, seers, and revelators. However, as one can see from the above graph, this frequency has increased considerably since 1950.

Certain Church leaders have made notable contributions to the emphasis on Joseph Smith's First Vision. Church leaders with ten or more citations from the 1880s to the 1930s include President Heber J. Grant²² (twenty), President Charles W. Penrose²³ (ten), Elder Orson F. Whitney²⁴ (ten), and Elder George F. Richards²⁵ (ten). Particularly noteworthy is the fact that beginning in 1920, during the centennial commemoration of the First Vision, President Grant began referring to the First Vision much more regularly—a total of twelve times during the 1920s and three more times during the 1930s. As the Church commemorated that centennial landmark, President Grant appears to have been deliberately mindful of the importance of promulgating faith in the primal theophany of the Restoration for future generations of Latter-day Saints.

From the 1940s through the 1970s, Church leaders with ten or more citations from JS—H 1:15–20 in their conference talks include President Marion G. Romney²⁶ (eighteen), Elder Bruce R. McConkie²⁷ (eighteen), Elder LeGrand Richards²⁸ (fourteen), President Spencer W. Kimball²⁹ (thirteen), President N. Eldon Tanner³⁰ (twelve), and President Ezra Taft Benson³¹ (ten). It is noteworthy that three of these six leaders spent a considerable amount of time in the First Presidency, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s when most of their citations occurred, with another (President Benson) serving as President of the Quorum of the Twelve throughout the latter part of the 1970s, during which time one-third of his citations came. Thus emphasis on the First Vision during this time came from those holding some of the highest ecclesiastical positions in the Church.

In the most recent four decades, Church leaders with ten or more citations include President Gordon B. Hinckley³² (twenty), President Boyd K. Packer³³ (fourteen), and President Thomas S. Monson³⁴ (thirteen). Eleven of President Hinckley's citations came during the last eight years of his ministry as President of the Church (2000–8), second only to President Heber J. Grant for most citations from a President of the Church in a single decade. Perhaps he too felt a certain inspired obligation to reinforce faith in this first divine manifestation to the Prophet Joseph Smith as the Church entered a new century. Seven of President Monson's citations came during the 1990s

while he was serving as a counselor in the First Presidency. Nine of President Packer's citations occurred between 1990 and 2015, during which time he was serving as Acting President or President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. From the 1880s through the 2010s, the emphasis on the First Vision overall has come from the highest leaders of the Church, thus cementing its importance and truthfulness for members of the Church.

First Vision General Conference Hits by Theme per Decade

After identifying the total number of citations in all general conferences of the Church, each usage was coded into one of the eight major themes, as mentioned earlier. Each coding was cross-checked by another researcher to verify coding reliability. Each of these themes will now be presented with a representative quotation and brief thoughts about the potentially transformative impact of each theme.

Theme 1: God Is an Embodied Personage, in Whose Image We Are Created

The first of the five prominent themes connected with the First Vision, as noted by B. H. Roberts in 1893, is exemplified in this testimony from President James E. Faust, then a member of the First Presidency: "God and His Son are glorified personages. God the Father is our living Creator, and His Son, Jesus Christ, is our Savior and Redeemer. We have been created in God's image. We know this because Joseph Smith saw Them, They talked to him, and he talked to Them."³⁵ This theological theme is potentially transformative because it reaffirms our divine identity as literal children of God with the inherent capacity to become like him. In this sense, the First Vision affirms both the beginning and the end of the plan of salvation.

Theme 2: The Distinctness of the Father and the Son as Separate Beings

An example of this theme comes from Elder L. Tom Perry's statement as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles: "When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air' . . . This vision revealed unto us that God our Father and Jesus Christ, His Beloved Son, are two separate personages. Each has a body of flesh and bones that is glorified and perfected, thus clearing up the misconception that had been in existence for many centuries

concerning the concept of God.”³⁶ This theme is not just a matter of winning a theological debate. Part of the transformative power of this truth pertains to knowing God, which the Savior said in John 17:3 is necessary to having eternal life. And as Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles suggested, we are to strive to “know these Divine Beings in every way we can . . . [so that we can] love Them, draw near to Them, obey Them, and try to be like Them.”³⁷ The First Vision can be transformative because it helps us know more about the identity of the only true God.

Theme 3: Confirmation of the Great Apostasy

To illustrate this theme, Elder Charles A. Didier, an emeritus General Authority Seventy, declared, “Once again direct revelation answered Joseph Smith’s question: ‘Which of all the [churches] was right . . . and which I should join. I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong.’ Once again apostasy was declared from the source of truth—by Jesus Christ Himself. And once again it had to be followed by a restoration, and indeed it was.”³⁸ Without the Apostasy, there would be no need for a Restoration. This ecclesiastical statement is potentially transformative as the vital starting point for the narrative of the entire Restoration. This declaration from the Savior in the Sacred Grove transforms our understanding of the entire religious world and requires every person to find out for himself or herself what the Restoration has to offer that has been missing in all other religions of the world since ancient times.

Theme 4: Revelation Has Not Ceased

When general conference speakers teach this theme from the First Vision, they often echo sentiments similar to those expressed by Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles: “The centuries that followed [the deaths of Jesus and His Apostles] were illuminated by occasional rays of gospel light until, in the 19th century, a brilliant dawn of Restoration broke upon the world, and the gospel of Christ, full and complete, was once again upon the earth. This glorious day began when, in ‘a pillar of light . . . above the brightness of the sun’ God the Father and His Beloved Son, Jesus Christ, visited young Joseph Smith and initiated what would become a virtual flood of revelation linked with divine power and authority.”³⁹ This theme has both ecclesiastical and personal potential transformative power. Ecclesiastically, one of the distinctive principles of The Church of Jesus Christ

of Latter-day Saints is that we are led by prophets, seers, and revelators who receive divine communication for the governance of the Kingdom from the Savior himself. Additionally, members of Jesus Christ's Church take great comfort in the promise that they can also receive revelation for their own lives and for their families as well. The First Vision affirms revelation for the guidance of God's kingdom on earth through his authorized servants as well as for our individual lives.

Theme 5: God Lives and Has Modern Testators of His Reality

Elder M. Russell Ballard, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, affirmed this theme with the following example: "Oh, what marvelous light and truth were shed upon [Joseph Smith] that day as he beheld the glorious manifestation of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Once again God called a prophet as He did in the days of Noah, Abraham, and Moses."⁴⁰ This theological theme with profound ecclesiastical implications is potentially transformative because in a world where occasional waves of "God is dead" ideologies seem to crash over the world, the First Vision affirms, with eyewitness boldness, that "God is not dead, nor doth He sleep!"⁴¹ God lives and is still at the helm, guiding his children toward their ultimate destiny through living prophets who bear witness of him.

Theme 6: God Knows Us Individually

Using the First Vision to teach that God knows us individually was the first theme that James Allen suggested in 1980 was becoming increasingly more common. This personal experience from Sister Elaine S. Dalton, then a counselor in the Young Women's General Presidency, typifies this theme as expressed by general conference speakers: "When I visited the Sacred Grove, I tried to imagine what it must have been like to have been Joseph Smith . . . Then came the powerful realization that we are all the beneficiaries of his faith, courage, and steadfast desire to obey God. He had received an answer to his humble prayer. He had seen the Father and His Beloved Son. There in the Sacred Grove, I knew that Heavenly Father not only knew Joseph Smith by name, but He also knows each of us by name."⁴² This theme is potentially transformative for us personally because it affirms that we are literal children of a Heavenly Father with whom we can have an intimate parent-child relationship. As Professor Robert Millet, former dean of Religious Education

at BYU, has taught, God's infinity does not preclude his intimacy nor his immediacy.⁴³

Theme 7: Shared Theophany

To explain what is meant by this second theme that James Allen believed was gaining momentum in 1980, he wrote: "Once the vision assumed its predominant place in [Latter-day Saint] writing and preaching, it became much more than Joseph Smith's personal experience—it became a shared community experience. Every [member of the Church] and every prospective convert was urged to pray for his or her own testimony of its reality—in effect, to seek a personal theophany by becoming one with Joseph in the grove."⁴⁴ Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles instructed listeners at general conference, "As young Joseph Smith returned to his home from the Sacred Grove immediately after the appearance of the Father and the Son, he spoke first with his mother. As he 'leaned up to the fireplace, [his] mother inquired what the matter was. [Joseph] replied, 'Never mind, all is well—I am well enough off.' [He] then said to [his] mother, 'I have learned for myself.'" Joseph's experience provides a powerful pattern of learning that each of us should emulate. We too need to learn for ourselves."⁴⁵ This theme has immense personally transformative meaning and power because, for one reason, a major objective of the Restoration, as stated in Doctrine and Covenants 1:20, is that ultimately "every man might speak in the name of the Lord." This seems to be an allusion to the eventual fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy in Jeremiah 31:34 that in the last days when God would make a new covenant with the house of Israel, "they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord." This will come about because, hearkening back to Doctrine and Covenants 1, God is "no respecter of persons, and will that all men shall know" (verse 35). Latter-day Saints believe that the Lord is "willing to make these things known unto all flesh" (verse 34). While the details of Joseph Smith's experience may be unique, the need and privilege of knowing for oneself is universal.

Theme 8: Overcoming Adversity

In our research, we found enough statements from Church leaders at general conference referring to Joseph Smith's overcoming the influence of the adversary just before his theophany that we determined to include this as

an emerging theme.⁴⁶ While this theme is connected to three of the teachings identified by Allen,⁴⁷ it has a slightly more specific focus. Church leaders in general conference referred to this theme in many ways, including overcoming darkness, triumphing over temptation, and enduring adversity. The following story from Sister Colleen K. Menlove, while serving as the Primary General President, characterizes this theme:

After a Primary lesson about Joseph Smith's First Vision, the class was asked to draw pictures to take home and share with their families. The children had been taught about the darkness Joseph experienced before the appearance of the Father and the Son. A six-year-old girl picked up a black crayon and started to draw. She colored the bottom and up one side of the page as dark as she could. When her teacher asked her about the picture, she said she was drawing Joseph Smith in the darkness. Her teacher inquired: "Do you know that when Heavenly Father and Jesus appeared, all the darkness had to leave? Heavenly Father and Jesus are always more powerful than Satan, and They will protect you." The child turned back to her paper. In the top corner, she drew an outline of two figures; and then, trading her black crayon for a bright yellow one, she filled the rest of the page with light. . . .

The adversary is real, but children can feel the peace and the joy that come as they exercise faith in Jesus Christ.⁴⁸

While this theme has possible theological value (i.e., emphasizing the supremacy of God's power over Satan's) and ecclesiastical implications (i.e., God will use that power to protect and guard his Church), its greatest transformative potential may lie in its personal meaning for each of us. From many prophecies concerning the last days, we know that Satan's influence will increase around the world as he scratches and claws and gnashes his teeth, knowing he is on his way to certain eternal defeat. But the light of truth, the light of God, will also continue to increase on the face of the earth and it will always be more powerful. This can give us remarkable hope, confidence, and assurance as we face our personal trials, temptations, and moments of darkness.

In addition to these eight themes, the following chart includes a miscellaneous category that was created for coding usages that did not match any of these themes but also did not have enough similar matches with other usages to justify the creation of a new category. While there were a few minor themes within these miscellaneous hits—such as using the First Vision as evidence for Jesus Christ's resurrection or lessons on parenting from the First Vision—none of these had enough hits to justify another major category of its own when compared with the previous eight categories.⁴⁹

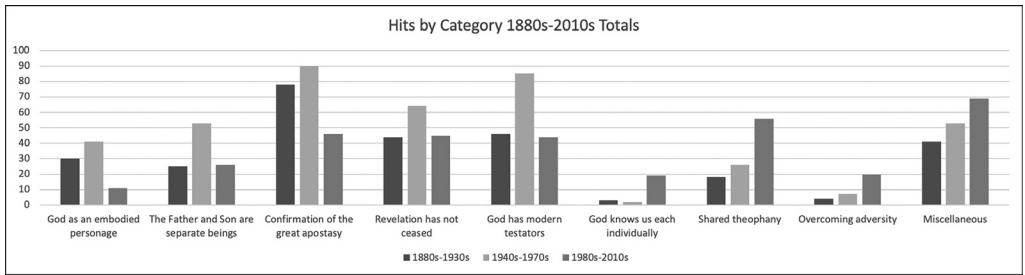


Figure 3. First Vision general conference citations by category by era.

While many observations could be made and inquiries explored with this data, we will offer just four observations here. First, of the five themes suggested by Elder Roberts in 1893, Church leaders during general conference seem to be less inclined to use the First Vision to teach the embodiedness of God and the distinctness of the Father and the Son. Thus, while these truths are still significant for our understanding of the true nature of the Godhead, general conference speakers tend not to focus on the First Vision to teach these particular theological truths for that audience in that particular context.

Second, from the 1880s all the way through the 1970s, Church leaders tended to focus more on how the First Vision confirmed the Apostasy and inaugurated a new dispensation with ongoing revelation through living testators than at any other time in our history. Even though these particular themes were less common from the 1980s to the present, using the First Vision to teach these themes has remained a steady pattern, thus affirming the First Vision as an important ecclesiastical moment that validates the need for the Restoration of the Lord's Church to the earth. This may stem from the fact that the 1838–56 account became the canonized version, with its focus on the “rise of the Church of Christ.”⁵⁰

Our final two observations pertain to the two themes that James Allen projected in 1980 would gain increasing prominence among Latter-day Saints. Other than during the 2000s, which saw a modest spike in Church leaders using the First Vision to teach that God knows us individually,⁵¹ this has not been a significant focus of Church leaders in general conference messages since 1980. It is certainly more prominent than in previous eras, but still not as prevalent as other themes. Thus Allen's 1980 projection was only somewhat correct on this point. On the other hand, Allen's other projection that the First Vision would increasingly be used as a pattern that members of the

Church should follow to “learn for themselves” has been validated through this research. Throughout general conferences from the 1980s through the 2010s, Church leaders have used the First Vision to teach this theme more than any other single theme connected with the First Vision over the past forty years. Combined with the hits for “God knows us each individually” and “overcoming the adversary” (which usually have a personal focus), Church leaders from 1980 to 2019 seem to be emphasizing the personal spiritual value of the First Vision over its theological and ecclesiastical implications. As further evidence of this, consider President Russell M. Nelson’s 2020 video invitation to prepare for general conference by pondering the “hear Him” phrase from verse 17 and reflecting on how we “hear Him” in our lives.⁵² This also seems to be the case as more members of the Church increasingly focus on this aspect of the 1832 account where the First Vision is more about a personal quest for salvation; for example, see the second episode of the 2020 Joseph Smith Papers Podcast series.⁵³ Joseph’s quest for truth began primarily as a deeply personal inquiry and it continues to stand as an inspiring narrative witness that God is indeed a rewarder of those who diligently seek him.

April 2020 General Conference

In light of this historical context, let us now turn to the April 2020 general conference, which President Nelson said would “be different from any previous conference” in conjunction with the bicentennial commemoration of this sacred momentous event.⁵⁴ While there were many differences between the April 2020 general conference and previous conferences, this section will focus on notable differences between this historic conference and any previous conference regarding the usage of the First Vision by Church leaders.

One very notable difference was the frequency of references to the First Vision. Church leaders referred to the First Vision thirty-nine times in their conference messages—this is nearly double the number of times the First Vision was referred to in the April 1920 general conference commemorating the centennial anniversary of Joseph Smith’s grand theophany! Of the thirty-nine references to the First Vision, seventeen were direct citations of JS—H 1:15–20. Following the pattern we have already identified, JS—H 1:17 continued to be the most oft-cited verse from the Pearl of Great Price text, with thirteen specific hits. Verse 16 was cited twice, and verses 15 and 18 were cited once each. Verses 19 (historically the second most frequently cited verse) and 20 were not directly cited at all.

Because the April 2020 general conference had the most references to the First Vision of any single general conference to date, there were several other corresponding “mosts” in this conference. President Nelson’s nine references were the most by any President of the Church in any single general conference—even in the April 1920 general conference, President Grant referred to it only twice. The fourteen references from the First Presidency were the most from the First Presidency in any single general conference. The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles collectively referred to the First Vision nineteen times; this was the most that the quorum had collectively referred to the First Vision in a single conference. In fact, all but one member of the quorum referred to the First Vision in some way. Additionally, each General President of the Relief Society (Jean B. Bingham), the Young Women (Bonnie H. Cordon), and the Primary (Joy D. Jones) referred to the First Vision—a resounding endorsement of the verity of the First Vision and its potentially transformative impact from the women leaders of the Church. In contrast, there was also an interesting “least” statistic. Given the regularity with which General Authority Seventies have referred to the First Vision historically (see figure 2), it was somewhat surprising that no member of the Seventy cited JS—H 1:15–20 or referred to the First Vision during their messages in the April 2020 general conference.

Perhaps of greater interest than how often the First Vision was referred to in the April 2020 general conference is the meaning the speakers drew from it at this historic moment. Each of the nine categories mentioned previously is listed below (from most citations to least citations) with the number of times each category was emphasized during this general conference⁵⁵:

- Shared theophany (12)
- Revelation has not ceased (10)
- Miscellaneous (10)⁵⁶
- God lives and has modern testators of his reality (5)
- Confirmation of the Great Apostasy (4)
- Overcoming adversity (4)
- God is an embodied personage, in whose image we are created (1)
- The distinctness of the Father and the Son as separate beings (1)
- God knows us individually (1)

Remarkably, each theme was mentioned to at least some degree by Church leaders in this single general conference. The theological implications

of the First Vision concerning God as an embodied being and the distinctness of the Father and the Son were the least prominent. Only Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles emphasized that Joseph Smith “learned about the true nature of the Godhead” through the First Vision, but did not enumerate any specific truths he was taught through that theophany.⁵⁷

Ecclesiastical themes were considerably more prevalent than theological themes during the April 2020 general conference. Confirmation of the Great Apostasy as justification for the Restoration was the least prominent ecclesiastical theme.⁵⁸ The theme of a living God having modern testators commissioned to bear witness of him to the world was mentioned by two members of the First Presidency and three members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Most of all, speakers emphasized that the First Vision inaugurated a renewed era of revelation through modern testators. Elder Gerrit W. Gong of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles reminded listeners that because of the First Vision, “the heavens are again open.”⁵⁹ Sister Jean B. Bingham, Relief Society General President, declared that the First Vision “began a modern outpouring of revelation from heaven.”⁶⁰ And Elder Ronald A. Rasband of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles anchored all revelatory developments of the Restoration in the First Vision when he stated: “That vision was a magnificent beginning to the Restoration of the gospel and all that unfolded, from the Book of Mormon to the return of priesthood authority and keys, the organization of the Lord’s true Church, temples of God, and prophets and apostles who lead the work in these latter days.”⁶¹

Although the theme that God knows us individually received only one usage at this conference, the personal implications of the First Vision were most prominent at the April 2020 General Conference. The new theme we have identified in our research of using the First Vision as a pattern for overcoming adversity was mentioned four times in this conference. President Henry B. Eyring of the First Presidency offered this assurance: “Satan’s attempt to thwart the beginning of the Restoration was so severe because Joseph’s prayer was so important. You and I will have smaller parts to play in the ongoing Restoration. Yet the enemy of the Restoration will try to stop us from praying. The example of Joseph’s faith and his determination can strengthen us in our resolve.”⁶² President Nelson reiterated this theme by offering this timely counsel to a world awash in iterative waves of uncertainty and fear: “Joseph Smith was in the grips of a force of darkness just before the heavens opened. Our Father knows that when we are surrounded

by uncertainty and fear, what will help us the very most is to hear His Son.”⁶³ But the most oft-repeated theme at this singular conference was that Joseph Smith’s initial theophany portrayed a fundamental spiritual pattern that all members of the Church—indeed, all people of the world—need to and can follow. Although this theme was mentioned a dozen times, more than any other single theme, we will offer just two noteworthy examples here. Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles extended the following invitation imbued with this theme:

It is my hope that, in this bicentennial year of the First Vision, as we contemplate and learn of the Restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ, we will realize that it is not just a historical event. You and I play a crucial part in this great, continuing story.

What, then, is your and my part?

It is to learn of Jesus Christ. To study His words. To hear Him and to follow Him by actively participating in this great work. I invite you to come and belong!

You don’t have to be perfect. You only have to have a desire to develop your faith and draw nearer to Him each day.⁶⁴

Epitomizing this theme, President Nelson explained that the first enjoiner given to the boy prophet in 1820 establishes the course each of us must follow in our own personal spiritual quests:

This year, we commemorate the 200th anniversary of one of the most significant events in the history of the world—namely, the appearance of God the Father and His Beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to Joseph Smith. During that singular vision, God the Father pointed to Jesus Christ and said: “This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!”

That admonition given to Joseph is for each of us. We are to seek, in every way we can, to hear Jesus Christ, who speaks to us through the power and ministering of the Holy Ghost.⁶⁵

Given the challenges that the Church now faces and will yet face in the future, Church leaders at this historic general conference emphasized above all that nothing short of an individual divine manifestation to each person’s soul of the reality of Heavenly Father and his Son Jesus Christ and the Restoration of the fulness of the gospel in these latter days would sustain us as we seek their direction in preparing for that which is to come.

As the most significant event to happen in the world since the Resurrection of Jesus Christ,⁶⁶ Joseph Smith’s theophany of 1820—with all of its theological, ecclesiastical, and personal spiritual implications—has special spiritual power to draw people to Christ and into his kingdom. As President Nelson declared in his April 2020 *Ensign* message in advance of the special general conference commemorating the bicentennial of Joseph Smith’s First

Vision: “This work is empowered by a divine announcement made two hundred years ago. It consisted of only seven words: ‘This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!’ (see Joseph Smith—History 1:17).’ Uttered by Almighty God, that announcement brought a young Joseph Smith to the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁶⁷ It can do the same today for others who take this theophany seriously.

Conclusions

The data we have presented here verifies that the five themes noted by Elder Roberts in 1893—two theological and three ecclesiastical—continue to figure prominently in the addresses of Church leaders in general conference. In 1980, James Allen projected that two themes were gaining increasing attention, both of which were primarily about the First Vision’s personal spiritual meaning. The first theme, that God knows us individually, showed only a mild to moderate increase; while the second, that young Joseph’s spiritual quest invites us all into a community of “shared theophany,” showed a significant increase. We also demonstrated that Church leaders appear to be broadening out the didactic purposes of the First Vision to include other emerging themes, chief among these being how the First Vision narrative can increase our faith in God to help us overcome the adversary and adversity—a theme with theological, ecclesiastical, and personal spiritual meaning. All of this demonstrates that the First Vision, as cited and alluded to by Church leaders in general conference, continues to be a transformative event for Latter-day Saints because of its profound theological, ecclesiastical, and personal implications. Emphasizing these themes can help us maximize the impact of the First Vision as we teach about it in our homes and in the Church, and as we proclaim the glorious message of this profound theophany throughout the world.

Notes

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Marvelous Foundation of Our Faith,” *Ensign*, November 2002, 80.
2. James B. Allen, “Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith’s First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought,” in *Exploring the First Vision*, ed. Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2012), 238.
3. While the version now canonized in the Pearl of Great Price is most often referred to as the “1838 account,” the Joseph Smith Papers website lists it as the 1838–56 account,

presumably to acknowledge the editing and redacting process that may have continued to form this version of Joseph Smith's First Vision for nearly two decades after the date of its original preparation; see "Primary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision of Deity," The Joseph Smith Papers.

4. See B. H. Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon & Sons, 1893), 307–8.

5. I am deeply indebted to two dedicated and impressive research assistants, Noah Chain and Natalie Kolsen, for their tremendous efforts in identifying how often general conference speakers referenced the First Vision, coding this data, and cross-checking it for accuracy. They are also credited with preparing the charts and graphs in this paper. Not only were their research efforts vital to this project, but their insights gleaned while doing the research were invaluable.

6. We also limited our search parameters only to citations or phrase hits related to the currently canonized account of the First Vision; future studies may focus on how other versions of the First Vision, especially those published during the Prophet Joseph Smith's lifetime, have been used in recent years.

7. The LDS Scripture Citation Index, produced by Stephen W. Liddle and Richard C. Galbraith, can be found at <https://scriptures.byu.edu/>.

8. To find general conference talks before 1942, we tried to use the LDS General Conference Corpus (no author) which can be found at <https://www.lds-general-conference.org>. This site claims to contain talks from general conferences of the Church from 1851 to 2020. However, we found some immediate discrepancies while cross-checking our research results. Thus we started searching specific Conference Reports from Archive.org. On this site, we found the Conference Reports from October 1897 to October 1949, which we searched individually.

9. To get as much as we could from October 1880 to April 1897, we were advised by the Church History Library to use the "Early Church Conference Reports" database, compiled by Elden J. Watson, which can be found at <http://www.eldenwatson.net/ECCRintro.htm>.

10. The version of the Pearl of Great Price that was most likely used for canonization at the October 1880 general conference was the 1878 edition prepared by Elder Orson Pratt and published in Salt Lake City. A digital version of this edition can be found at <https://archive.org/details/pearlgreatpriceoosmitgoog/page/n8/mode/2up>. All editions from 1878 to 1901 follow this same basic formatting. In 1902, James E. Talmage (who would be ordained a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in 1911) was assigned to work with three other members of the Quorum of the Twelve on a new edition of the Pearl of Great Price that first used chapters and verse numbers. Thanks to the generous and timely cooperation of the Church History Library, a digital version of this edition of the Pearl of Great Price can be found at <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=3d8c138b-b179-4b74-ae1e-afb5aae1b488&crate=0&index=0>.

11. See Robert J. Matthews, "The New Publication of the Standard Works—1979, 1981," *Brigham Young University Studies* 22, no. 4 (Fall 1982), 418, 421.

12. Searches used the following phrases, as well as some varying combinations of these words: Sacred Grove, First Vision, Beloved Son, Finding myself alone, Thick darkness gathered, Pillar of light, Saw two personages, Join none of them, Which of all the sects, Forbade me to join, I have learned for myself, Almost in my infancy, Delivered from the enemy, Get possession of myself, Exerting all my powers, Creeds were an abomination. Hits located

through these searches were then assigned to the corresponding modern verses; i.e., hits for “pillar of light” would be assigned to JS—H 1:17. While the LDSCI has inserted citations for JS—H 1:15–20 into general conference addresses found in *Journal of Discourses* from 1880 to 1886 and Conference Reports from 1942 to 1949, we did not know their criteria for doing so; thus we employed this method to maintain consistency for the 1880–1949 era.

13. From 1902 to 1981, what we call Joseph Smith—Matthew today was Joseph Smith 1 and what we call Joseph Smith—History was Joseph Smith 2. The LDSCI has appropriately updated all Joseph Smith 2 references to Joseph Smith—History.

14. The October 2019 general conference was the last conference during the decade of the 2010s. The April 2020 general conference will be treated in a section by itself, because it was the first and only conference of the decade of the 2020s as of the writing of this paper.

15. Two of the decades in this study only had nineteen general conferences being analyzed. Because we began with the October 1880 general conference when the Pearl of Great Price was canonized, there are only nineteen general conferences for that decade. Also, the October 1957 general conference was cancelled amidst concerns about a flu epidemic, so the 1950s have only nineteen general conferences of the Church instead of the typical twenty.

16. See Don Enders, “The Sacred Grove,” 20 February 2019, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/content/historic-sites/palmyra/sacred-grove>.

17. See Kathleen Flake, “The First Vision as a Prehistory of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (2020): 59–72.

18. Hinckley, October 2002, 80; emphasis added.

19. Speakers in the twenty sessions of general conference held during this decade cited verse 15 thirteen times, verse 16 six times, verse 17 forty-three times, verse 18 twenty-two times, verse 19 twenty-eight times, and verse 20 just twice. Thus JS—H 1:15–20 was cited by general conference speakers a total of 114 times during this decade. Total citations for the 1910s was 76, while total citations for the 1930s was 49.

20. See Callum G. Brown, “What Was the Religious Crisis of the 1960s?,” *Journal of Religious History* 34, no. 4 (December 2010): 468–79; Hugh McLeod, “Christian Churches and Religion in the 20th Century,” *Journal of Modern European History* 3, no. 2 (2005): 205–30; Joanne Beckman, “Religion on Post-World War II America,” The National Humanities Center, October 2000, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/twenty/tkeyinfo/trelww2.htm>.

21. Due to the overlap of the calling of Assistants to the Twelve (beginning in 1941), the reorganization of the First Council of Seventy (1961), and the calling of the First Quorum of Seventy (1976) with the subsequent merging of the Assistants to the Twelve within that quorum, Assistants to the Twelve were classified as Seventies in this research. See Byron R. Merrill, “Assistants to the Twelve,” and Alan K. Parrish, “Seventy: Overview,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), https://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Assistants_to_the_Twelve and <https://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Seventy>.

22. Heber J. Grant served in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles from 1888 to 1918; he served as President of the Quorum from 1916 to 1918. From 1918 to 1945, he served as the seventh President of the Church.

23. Charles W. Penrose served in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles from 1904 to 1911. He served as a counselor in the First Presidency from 1911 to 1925.

24. Orson F. Whitney served as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles from 1906 to 1931.

25. George F. Richards served in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles from 1906 to 1950; he was President of the Quorum from 1945 to 1950.

26. Marion G. Romney served as an Assistant to the Twelve from 1941 to 1951. He served in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles from 1951 to 1972. He served as a counselor in the First Presidency from 1972 to 1985, at which time (due to health concerns) he returned to the Quorum of the Twelve, where he served as a member of the Quorum from 1985 to 1988. Although he was President of the Quorum during that time, Howard W. Hunter served as Acting President of the Quorum.

27. Bruce R. McConkie served in the First Council of Seventy from 1946 to 1972. From 1972 to 1985, he served in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

28. LeGrand Richards served as Presiding Bishop of the Church from 1938 to 1952. He served in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles from 1952 to 1983.

29. Spencer W. Kimball served in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles from 1943 to 1973. He served as Acting President of that Quorum from 1970 to 1972 and as President of the Quorum from 1972 to 1973. From 1973 to 1985, he served as the twelfth President of the Church.

30. N. Eldon Tanner served in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles from 1962 to 1963. In 1963 he was called as a counselor in the First Presidency and served in that capacity until his death in 1982.

31. Ezra Taft Benson served in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles from 1943 to 1985. From 1973 to 1985, he was President of that Quorum. From 1985 to 1994 he served as the thirteenth President of the Church.

32. Gordon B. Hinckley served in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles from 1961 to 1981. From 1981 to 1995, he served as a counselor in the First Presidency. From 1995 to 2008, he served as the fifteenth President of the Church.

33. Boyd K. Packer served in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles from 1970 to 2015. From 1994 to 2008, he served as Acting President of the Quorum, and from 2008 to 2015 he served as President of the Quorum.

34. Thomas S. Monson served in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles from 1963 to 1985. From 1985 to 2008, he served as a counselor in the First Presidency. From 2008 to 2018, he served as the sixteenth President of the Church.

35. James E. Faust, "The Light in Their Eyes," *Ensign*, November 2005, 21.

36. L. Tom Perry, "The Message of the Restoration," *Ensign*, May 2007, 86.

37. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Knowing the Godhead," *Ensign*, January 2016, 33.

38. Charles A. Didier, "The Message of the Restoration," *Ensign*, November 2003, 75.

39. D. Todd Christofferson, "The Doctrine of Christ," *Ensign*, May 2012, 86.

40. M. Russell Ballard, "The Miracle of the Holy Bible," *Ensign*, May 2007, 81.

41. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saint, 1985), no. 214.

42. Elaine S. Dalton, "He Knows You By Name," *Ensign*, May 2005, 109.

43. Robert L. Millet, "What We Believe," *BYU Speeches* (3 February 1998, devotional), <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/robert-l-millet/believe-4/>.

44. Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental," 247.

45. David A. Bednar, "Prepared to Obtain Every Needful Thing," *Ensign*, May 2019, 102.

46. Total hits for this theme from 1880 to 2019 were thirty-one, with twenty of those occurring from 1980 to 2019. The least common theme of the eight was "God knows us

individually,” with twenty-four total hits from 1880 to 2019 and nineteen of those recorded during 1980 to 2019. Thus it seemed reasonable to include this new theme that surpassed one of the other seven themes for which we were originally coding.

47. The three teachings identified by Allen were “The vision impeded the progress of Satan”; “Satan is always ready to stop the Lord’s work”; and “The vision was at once the most complete revelation of the powers of both heaven and hell.” Allen, “Emergence of a Fundamental,” 248–50.

48. Colleen K. Menlove, “A Voice of Gladness for Our Children,” *Ensign*, November 2002, 13.

49. It should also be noted here that because speakers sometimes address more than one category or theme when citing JS—H 1:15–20 or referring to the First Vision, the number of usages will not match the number of citations.

50. While the 1832 account of the First Vision emphasizes Joseph Smith’s more personal spiritual quest for forgiveness of sins and the 1835 account contains elements of both Joseph’s personal quest and the significance of the First Vision for the Restoration of the Church, the 1838–56 account seems more focused on the ecclesiastical meaning of Joseph Smith’s 1820 theophany. See “Primary Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision of Deity,” *The Joseph Smith Papers*. Further research into how general conference speakers use other accounts of the First Vision as these accounts become more prominent may yield additional insights.

51. Of the nineteen references to this theme from the 1980s to 2010s, eleven came from the 2000s.

52. See “President Nelson’s Second Invitation of 2020: ‘How Do You Hear Him? #HearHim,’” <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/president-nelsons-second-invitation-of-2020-how-do-you-hear-him-hearhim?lang=eng>.

53. “The First Vision: A Joseph Smith Papers Podcast,” *The Joseph Smith Papers*.

54. Russell M. Nelson, “Closing Remarks,” *Ensign*, November 2019, 122.

55. Again, it is important to keep in mind that because speakers sometimes taught one or more themes when referencing the First Vision, the number of total citations and usage by category will not match.

56. Nearly all of these usages were simply passing references to the First Vision for historical frame of reference or alluding to this particular conference as commemorating the bicentennial anniversary of the First Vision.

57. David A. Bednar, “Let This House Be Built unto My Name,” *Ensign*, May 2020, 84.

58. This corresponds with the fact that verse 19 was not cited during the April 2020 general conference.

59. Gerrit W. Gong, “Hosanna and Hallelujah—The Living Jesus Christ: The Heart of Restoration and Easter,” *Ensign*, May 2020, 53.

60. Jean B. Bingham, “United in Accomplishing God’s Work,” *Ensign*, May 2020, 61.

61. Ronald A. Rasband, “Fulfillment of Prophecy,” *Ensign*, May 2020, 75.

62. Henry B. Eyring, “Prayers of Faith,” *Ensign*, May 2020, 29.

63. Russell M. Nelson, “Hear Him,” *Ensign*, May 2020, 89.

64. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Come and Belong,” *Ensign*, May 2020, 106–7.

65. Russell M. Nelson, “Opening Message,” *Ensign*, May 2020, 7.

66. See Robert L. Simpson, “Our Fundamental Obligation: The Priesthood,” *Ensign*, November 1973; James E. Faust, “The Magnificent Vision Near Palmyra,” *Ensign*, May 1984; Gordon B. Hinckley, “What Are People Asking About Us?” *Ensign*, November 1998; “The

First Vision,” <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/content/the-first-vision?lang=eng>; and “Why is the First Vision Important?” *Come Follow Me—For Young Women*, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/youth/learn/yw/apostasy-restoration/first-vision?lang=eng>.

67. Russell M. Nelson, “The Future of the Church: Preparing the World for the Savior’s Second Coming,” *Ensign*, April 2020, 13.