



Introduction

In 1820 Joseph Smith experienced a glorious theophany that opened an era of restoration. This singular event occurred because one young man acted upon his knowledge of Christ. As a result of such efforts, Joseph received what he had been seeking: forgiveness of his sins. He also received divine instruction, the import of which he only came to understand during the subsequent two decades. While the Father and the Son had appeared to the teenage Joseph and revealed significant truths to him, it took learning, experience, and reflection for him to fully comprehend the profound nature of what he had seen and heard. His efforts to translate the Book of Mormon, organize the Church of Christ, revise the Bible, and restore other sacred scriptures, structures, truths, and practices shed light on his initial encounter with deity. Over time, he achieved a mature understanding of his youthful experience. In his later accounts of what became known as the First Vision, Joseph emphasized the Lord's command

to not join other churches and the promise that the truth would be made known to him in due time. His successive experiences and ongoing revelations helped him recognize the salience of these early directions. They also gifted him an understanding of what he had heard, as well as what he had seen; they provided him with insight into the nature of God and of Jesus Christ, the beings whom he worshipped and to whom he would consecrate the remainder of his life.

On 6 May 1833, about thirteen years after his First Vision, Joseph received a revelation that expanded his knowledge of Christ and his understanding of how to act upon that knowledge. In drawing upon and clarifying Johannine teachings about the Lord, the latter-day revelation shared truths meant to help early Church members “understand and know how to worship and know what [they] worship” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:19). This revelatory reworking of the Prologue of John (John 1:1–18) sheds light not only on the subject of our worship, Christ, but also on the process of how to worship him. Although the immediate context of the revelation remains obscure—and perhaps tellingly so—it uncovered truths about the nature of Christ, who, according to the account, “continued from a grace to grace, until he received a fulness” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:13). The revelation went further in linking those truths to the process of worship by instructing its audience to obey Christ’s commandments, which would allow *them* to “receive grace for grace” (93:20). It also clarified that the revealed understanding of the nature of Christ had power to unveil the erstwhile obscured nature of those who worship him.

In addressing both the *who* and the *how* of worship, the revelation now known as section 93 of the Doctrine and Covenants deals with concepts that scholars term *Christology* and *praxis*. Christology has to do with the study of Christ’s nature and mission, while praxis involves religious practice and worship. In light of Smith’s experiences and revelations, the study of Christ demands attention to the spiritual and intellectual quest (Doctrine and Covenants 88:118) to “know” the Savior (John 17:3). That section 93 should insist on the

“how” of worship indicates that *praxis* is inseparable from knowledge of Christ: as King Benjamin taught, it is a mark of discipleship, the outward manifestation of knowledge (Mosiah 5:15). But it is also more encompassing; it is more wholistic. In a revelation dictated by Joseph Smith in 1829, the Lord enjoined those who “embark in the service of God” to “serve him with all your heart, might, mind and strength” (Doctrine and Covenants 4:2). *Praxis*, in other words, also comprises the imperceptible workings of both heart and mind. When knowledge and practice combine, the outward manifestation may be insufficient to convey the intensity and beauty of inner devotion (1 Samuel 1:9–13).

Although something essential about the interaction between knowledge and practice remains hidden from view, the revelations and teachings of Joseph Smith open up vistas on this relationship and constitute a unique textual setting to analyze its meaning and power. Joseph’s latter-day scriptural productions and instructions on Christ and discipleship in particular prize learning as both a form of worship and a central component in the process of salvation. In one such revelation, the Lord taught the members, “seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:118).

Latter-day Saint commentary on this passage has a long and illustrious history. After citing it in the introduction to the final volume of his *Seventy’s Course in Theology*, early twentieth-century historian and writer B. H. Roberts illustrated the connection between study and faith by referencing another revelatory passage, the one in which the Lord explained to Oliver Cowdery that he had failed to translate the Book of Mormon because he had not studied “it out in [his] mind” (Doctrine and Covenants 9:8).¹ Roberts, a President of the Seventy, found in Joseph’s revelations an imperative to apply the intellect to sacred truths. “Men seem to think that because inspiration and revelation are factors in connection with the things of God,” he wrote, “the pain and stress of mental effort are not required.” Observing in his time what seems to be a perennial problem, he noted that “it is

much in fashion to laud ‘the simple faith;’ which is content to believe without understanding, or even without much effort to understand. And doubtless many good people regard this course as indicative of reverence,” he continued, before suggesting that “this sort of ‘reverence’ is easily simulated . . . and falls into the same category as the simulated humility couched in ‘I don’t know,’ which so often really means ‘I don’t care, and do not intend to trouble myself to find out.’”² In response to such intellectual complacency, Roberts called on “the mighty exhortations and rebukes of the New Dispensations of the Gospel of the Christ,” which included numerous quotations from Joseph’s revelations and teachings.³

Near the end of the twentieth century, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles also addressed the scriptural view of “faith and learning as mutually facilitating.”⁴ After quoting the very revelation—section 88—that Roberts had used to begin his commentary on faith and intellect, Elder Neal A. Maxwell described the disciple-scholar as one who worships through scholarship.⁵ “For a disciple of Jesus Christ,” he said, “academic scholarship is a form of worship. It is actually another dimension of consecration.”⁶ The application of one’s mind—a gift of God—constitutes a form of consecration. “Hence,” Elder Maxwell continued, “one who seeks to be a disciple-scholar will take both scholarship and discipleship seriously; and, likewise, gospel covenants. For the disciple-scholar, the first and second great commandments frame and prioritize life. How else,” he asked, “could one worship God with all of one’s heart, might, mind, and strength?” Elder Maxwell taught that the two great commandments should train our attention on God and Christ and on the those who seek to worship them.

In light of the insistence that the life of the mind is bound up with the life of faith and that the things of God require critical thinking, the 2020 Sidney B. Sperry Symposium explores Christology and praxis in the revelations and teachings of Joseph Smith.⁷ This focus gives shape to the scope of this volume and its corresponding symposium. We think readers will find confirmation that Joseph’s

revelations and teachings on the topics of Christ and religious practice encourage the cultivation of a number of fruitful topics. These subjects include the First Vision, the nature of God, Christ, and humankind, the process of becoming like Christ and God, the nature of the light of Christ and the location of his Atonement, the various critical roles the Lord desires and expects for women in the Church as indicated in the revelation to Emma Smith, and worship as a call to learn, promote peace, tolerate difference, and obtain exaltation. Joseph's revelatory productions on these topics and the records of his efforts to explain them lend themselves to a wide variety of disciplinary approaches and interpretations. In addressing questions related to Christology and praxis, the authors provide historical, exegetical, theological, and comparative readings of the revelations. In combination, these essays—these works of discipleship—shed light on fundamental gospel topics, though admittedly, they only begin to approach the grandeur of what the Lord revealed through the Prophet of the Restoration.

The creation of this volume has not only allowed us to consider the themes of Christology and praxis; it has encouraged us to reflect on how the theme of the symposium relates to our daily lives—the process of writing, revising, and editing have all fostered and encouraged a more worshipful way of living and being. Such a way of being demands the cultivation of relationships among those who worship God and Christ. Working on this volume has been a community effort, a work of collaboration that has strengthened friendships and fostered a deeper sense of respect for colleagues around the globe. Because scholarship is a form of discipleship, we understood that our editorial mission and the resulting volume had to be a mark of our devotion; what we present to God and to the Saints should reflect our best efforts. Despite these efforts, it will quickly become obvious to readers that the volume is far from perfect. We do hope, however, that readers will see the spirit of a disciple-scholar reflected in each chapter. We also hope that this volume will spur readers to consider their own heartfelt and mindful worship of God and of his Son, Jesus Christ.

We are grateful for those who submitted proposals and papers for the symposium and for those who sacrificed their time to peer review papers for potential publication. Our thanks go also to those who presented and to those who worked tirelessly to prepare their essays for inclusion in this volume. We are positively impressed by their generosity and are grateful to count all of them as fellow disciples in the kingdom and colleagues in the profession. Each deserves to be applauded for their commitment to this symposium and this volume.

We would like to thank all others who have been involved in this year's symposium and associated volume. We express our thanks to the deans who invited us to steer this project; it has proven to be a wonderful opportunity and an enriching experience. We are also grateful to the personnel in the Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University and at Deseret Book in helping this volume reach its published form. We would like to thank in particular Scott Esplin and his staff, including Brent Nordgren, Shirley Ricks, Sarah Johnson, and Emily Strong. Most importantly, Beverly Yellowhorse, a committee member and the director of our Faculty Support Center in Religious Education, cannot be thanked enough for the time she has invested, both in front and behind the scenes, to bring this volume and symposium to fruition. She has been involved in the process from the call for proposals to the closing prayer of the symposium, and to the publication of the actual book in between. Her work has been so much more than clerical. We cherish the great professionalism and devotion she displayed even through hardships, and we are grateful for her patience with us.

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Notes

1. B. H. Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology* (Salt Lake City: Salt Lake City, The Deseret News, 1907–1912), 5:iv.
2. Roberts, *Seventy's Course in Theology*, 5:v.
3. Roberts, *Seventy's Course in Theology*, 5:vi, vi–vii.
4. Neal A. Maxwell, “The Disciple-Scholar,” in *On Becoming a Disciple-Scholar*, ed. Henry B. Eyring (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1995), 1–23.
5. Maxwell, “The Disciple-Scholar,” 7.
6. Maxwell, “The Disciple-Scholar,” 7.
7. For examples of existing scholarship on Christology in Joseph Smith’s revelations, see Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2001), 409–85; Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: Of God and Gods* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2008); Douglas J. Davies, *Joseph Smith, Jesus, and Satanic Opposition* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 221–35; Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought; Cosmos, God, Humanity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 117–24; and John G. Turner, *The Mormon Jesus: A Biography* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 153–83.