

Chapter 1

Joseph Smith and the Rise of a World Religion

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A MIGHTY VISION must have filled the mind of Joseph Smith the Prophet as he spoke the following words only weeks before his death: “I calculate to be one of the instruments of setting up the [kingdom of God foreseen by] Daniel by the word of the Lord, and I intend to lay a foundation that will revolutionize the whole world. . . . It will not be by sword or gun that this kingdom will roll on: the power of truth is such that all nations will be under the necessity of obeying the Gospel.”¹

The revolution that we know as the Restoration began slowly, has progressed steadily, and will yet spread dramatically. The Restoration was not destined to take place in a corner; it would not be confined to a tiny element of this world’s population, nor would it be possible for people to ignore it. In the words of the risen Lord: “And when that day shall come, it shall come to pass that kings shall shut their mouths; for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider. For in that day, for my sake shall the Father work a work, which shall be a great and a marvelous work among them; and there shall be among them

1. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 366.

those who will not believe it, although a man shall declare it unto them” (3 Nephi 21:8–9).

In short, the marvelous work and a wonder—literally from Isaiah, the “miraculous miracle”—would become a world religion, one whose truth and influence for good would spread to every corner of the globe.

I am not a sociologist of religion, an anthropologist, or a statistician. I am not trained in demographics. But I do know something about what the scriptures and the prophets have declared relative to this “wonderful flood of light”² that has come into the world through the call and instrumentality of Joseph Smith Jr. We live in the early stages of the formation of a world religion. In this chapter, I would like to suggest briefly ten characteristics of a world religion and how it is that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will eventually become a mighty power, an ensign to the nations (see Isaiah 5:26).

1. A world religion spreads to all nations.

Rodney Stark, a noted sociologist of religion, after a serious investigation of patterns of Latter-day Saint growth, observed: “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Mormons, will soon achieve a worldwide following comparable to that of Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and the other dominant world faiths. . . . Indeed, today they stand on the threshold of becoming the first major faith to appear on earth since the Prophet Mohammed rode out of the desert.” Stark then suggested that a 30 percent per decade growth rate will result in over 60 million Mormons by the year 2080. A 50 percent per decade growth rate, which is actually lower than the real growth rate since World War II, will result in 265 million

2. *Messages of the First Presidency*, 6 vols., ed. James R. Clark (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–75), 4:205.

Mormons by 2080.³ Some fifteen years later, Stark acknowledged that his projections had missed the mark slightly: He had underestimated the growth of the Church by more than a million persons.⁴

Some Christians are deeply troubled that the Church's missionary efforts are not confined to non-Christians, that we bring our message to all people, regardless of their religious background. Because Latter-day Saints believe that what we have to share with others represents a *fulness* of the gospel of Jesus Christ and that the fulness is not found elsewhere, we feel a responsibility to make the message available to all who will hear. The great commission given to the Apostles when Jesus ascended into heaven, a commission to make disciples of all nations (see Matthew 28:19–20; Mark 16:15–18), has been repeated and renewed to the Latter-day Saints: “Go ye into all the world, preach the gospel to every creature, acting in the authority which I have given you, baptizing in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (D&C 68:8).

Elder Dallin H. Oaks pointed out that “our message [is] for everyone, believers as well as non-believers.” He noted that there are “two reasons for this answer—one a matter of principle and the other a matter of practicality. . . . We [preach] to believers as well as unbelievers because our message, the restored gospel, makes an important addition to the knowledge, happiness, and peace of all mankind. As a matter of practicality, we preach to believers as well as unbelievers because we cannot tell the difference.” Elder Oaks asked a distinguished religious leader: “When you stand before a congregation and look into the faces of the people, can you tell the difference between those who are real believers and those who are not?” He smiled wryly, and I sensed an admission that he had

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3. Rodney Stark, “The Rise of a New World Faith,” *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 1 (1984): 18–23.
 4. See James T. Duke, ed., *Latter-day Saint Social Life: Social Research on the LDS Church and Its Members* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1998), chapters 1–2.

understood the point.”⁵ Every person must have the opportunity to hear the gospel, either here or hereafter. Eventually “the truth of God will go forth boldly, nobly, and independent, till it has penetrated every continent, visited every clime, swept every country, and sounded in every ear, till the purposes of God shall be accomplished, and the Great Jehovah shall say the work is done.”⁶

But there is more. Elder Bruce R. McConkie explained that before the Lord Jesus can return in glory, two things must take place:

The first . . . is that the restored gospel is to be preached in every nation and among every people and to those speaking every tongue. Now there is one immediate reaction to this: Can't we go on the radio and preach the gospel to . . . the nations of the earth? We certainly can, but that would have very little bearing on the real meaning of the revelation that says we must preach it to every nation, kindred, and people. The reason is the second thing that must occur before the second coming: The revelations expressly, specifically, and pointedly say that when the Lord comes the second time to usher in the millennial era, he is going to find, in every nation, kindred, and tongue, and among every people, those who are kings and queens, who will live and reign a thousand years on earth (Revelation 5:9–10).

That is a significant statement that puts in perspective the preaching of the gospel to the world. Yes, we can go on the radio; we can proclaim the gospel to all nations by television or other modern invention. And to the extent that we can do it, so be it, it's all to the good. But that's not what is involved. What is involved is that the elders of Israel, holding the priesthood, in person have to trod the soil, eat in the homes of the people, figuratively put their arms around the honest in heart, feed them the gospel, and baptize them and confer the Holy Ghost upon them. Then these people have to progress and advance,

5. Dallin H. Oaks, in Conference Report, April 1998, 79.

6. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols., ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 4:540.

and grow in the things of the Spirit, until they can go to the house of the Lord, until they can enter a temple of God and receive the blessings of the priesthood, out of which come the rewards of being kings and priests.

The way we become kings and priests is through the ordinances of the house of the Lord. It is through celestial marriage; it is through the guarantees of eternal life and eternal increase that are reserved for the Saints in the temples. The promise is that when the Lord comes he is going to find in every nation and kindred, among every people speaking every tongue, those who will, at that hour of his coming, have already become kings and priests. . . . All this is to precede the second coming of the Son of Man.⁷

2. Doctrine and practice must remain orthodox and consistent as the Church spreads to foreign cultures.

Doctrinal finality rests with apostles and prophets, not theologians or scholars. One professor of religion at a Christian institution remarked to me, “You know, Bob, one of the things I love about my way of life as a religious academician is that no one is looking over my shoulder to check my doctrine and analyze the truthfulness of my teachings. Because there is no organizational hierarchy to which I am required to answer, I am free to write and declare whatever I choose.” I nodded kindly and chose not to respond at the time. I have thought since then, however, that what my friend perceives to be a marvelous academic freedom can become license to interpret, intuit, and exegete scripture in a myriad of ways, resulting in interpretations as diverse as the interpreters’ backgrounds, training, and proclivities. There are simply too many ambiguous sections of scripture to let the Bible speak for itself. This was, in fact, young Joseph Smith’s dilemma: “The teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all

7. Bruce R. McConkie, “To the Koreans, and All the People of Asia,” in Spencer J. Palmer, *The Expanding Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 141–42.

confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible” (Joseph Smith—History 1:12).

In many cases, neither linguistic training nor historical background will automatically produce the (divinely) intended meaning or clarification of difficult scriptural matters. Some of these matters are not insignificant. Who decides which interpretation Matthew or Paul or Jesus intended? Further, who decides who decides? What is the standard by which we judge and interpret? Who has the right to offer inspired commentary on words delivered by holy men and women of God who spoke and wrote anciently as they were moved upon by the Holy Spirit? (see 2 Peter 1:21). While each reader of holy writ should be in tune with the Spirit while reading scripture, Latter-day Saints believe that the final word on prophetic interpretation rests with prophets. As C. S. Lewis wisely remarked, “Unless the measuring rod is independent of the things measured, we can do no measuring.”⁸

In writing of *sola scriptura* as a tenet of the Reformation—the principle of “scripture alone” to establish doctrinal understanding—Randall Balmer of Barnard College at Columbia University observed that “Luther’s sentiments created a demand for Scriptures in the vernacular, and Protestants ever since have stubbornly insisted on interpreting the Bible for themselves, forgetting most of the time that they come to the text with their own set of cultural biases and personal agendas.” Balmer continued:

Underlying this insistence on individual interpretation is the assumption . . . that the plainest, most evident reading of the text is the proper one. Everyone becomes his or her own theologian. There is no longer any need to consult Augustine or Thomas Aquinas or Martin Luther about their understanding of various passages when you yourself are the final arbiter of what is the correct reading. This tendency, together with the absence of any authority structure within Protestantism, has

8. C. S. Lewis, “The Poison of Subjectivism,” in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 73.

created a kind of theological free-for-all, as various individuals or groups insist that *their* reading of the Bible is the only possible interpretation.⁹

Again, there is a great advantage to a priesthood hierarchy, in terms of maintaining doctrinal orthodoxy. While members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are perfectly free to think and reflect on whatever they choose and to draw doctrinal conclusions on their own, they are at the same time instructed to say in sermons and lessons, and to publish, “none other things than that which the prophets and apostles have written” (D&C 52:9). The declaration, clarification, and interpretation of doctrine for the Church as a whole rest with the presiding councils of the Church: the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (see Mosiah 18:18–19; 25:21–22; Ephesians 4:11–14).

3. The teachings of the faith must answer some of life’s most vexing questions and help to meet some of the deepest needs of humanity.

Sometimes I do not think we as Latter-day Saints appreciate fully what we have. I wonder whether we sense the import of the restored knowledge of the plan of salvation. A while ago I spoke with a member of the Church who had converted from Judaism about a decade before. We chatted for a couple of hours about what things within the faith were attractive to the average Jew and what things tended to turn them off. In regard to the latter category, my friend—a dedicated and devoted Saint—answered kindly but directly: “Some of my Jewish friends feel as if Mormonism provides quick and easy answers to questions that have been raised for millennia, and that a snappy answer to such mysteries as the nature of God, the problem of evil and suffering, life before and after death, and so forth bespeak

9. Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 24; emphasis in original.

a lack of awe and humility in the face of gargantuan issues.” I think the assessment is accurate. “The things of God are of deep import,” Joseph Smith wrote from Liberty Jail, “and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out.”¹⁰

For example, in considering but one doctrinal mystery, namely, life after death, Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang have written:

Expressions of the eternal nature of love and the hope for heavenly reunion persist in contemporary Christianity. Such sentiments, however, are not situated within a theological structure. Hoping to meet one’s family after death is a wish and not a theological argument. While most Christian clergy would not deny that wish, contemporary theologians are not interested in articulating the motif of meeting again in theological terms. The motifs of the modern heaven—eternal progress, love, and fluidity between earth and the other world—while acknowledged by pastors in their funeral sermons, are not fundamental to contemporary Christianity. Priests and pastors might tell families that they will meet their loved ones in heaven as a means of consolation, but contemporary thought does not support that belief as it did in the nineteenth century. There is no longer a strong theological commitment. . . .

The major exception to this caveat is the teaching of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, whose members are frequently referred to as the Mormons. The modern perspective on heaven—emphasizing the nearness and similarity of the other world to our own and arguing for the eternal nature of love, family, progress, and work—finds its greatest proponent in Latter-day Saint understanding of the afterlife. While most contemporary Christian groups neglect after-life beliefs, what happens to people after they die is crucial to Latter-day Saint teachings and rituals. Heavenly theology is the result not of mere speculation, but of revelation given to past and present church leaders. . . .

10. Smith, *Teachings*, 137.

There has been . . . no alteration of the Latter-day Saint understanding of the afterlife since its articulation by Joseph Smith. If anything, the Latter-day Saints in the twentieth century have become even bolder in their assertion of the importance of their heavenly theology. . . . In the light of what they perceive as a Christian world which has given up belief in heaven, many Latter-day Saints feel even more of a responsibility to define the meaning of death and eternal life.¹¹

4. A world religion must somehow strike the difficult balance between building upon the past, upon settled, bedrock doctrine, and reaching out for new insight and revelation.

To some extent, the growth and spread of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints may be attributed largely to what some would feel to be contradictory and irreconcilable processes: (1) constancy and adherence to “the ancient order of things” and (2) development and change, according to needs and circumstances. Mormonism may thus be characterized as a religious culture with both static and dynamic—priestly and prophetic—elements, a church acclimated to both conservative and progressive postures.

The Saints have held tenaciously to and grounded themselves in what we perceive to be the particular beliefs and rites of both ancient Judaism and first-century Christianity. At the same time, through a belief in modern and continuing revelation, Latter-day Saints have made shifts and developments in policies and procedures according to pressing needs and anticipated challenges. For example, much of the Judeo-Christian world would consider the Bible (particularly the parts they accept as scripture) as embodying the *canon*—the rule of faith and practice. As one of my professors in graduate school emphasized and reemphasized, if the word *canon*, the accepted books of scripture, means anything at all, it is then set, fixed, closed, and established. The Latter-day Saint canon, on the other hand, is open,

11. Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 312–13, 322.

flexible, and, when Church leaders feel divinely directed, expanding.

This Church could not operate properly for twenty-four hours without divine guidance, nor could each of us fulfill our assignments in the home and the Church without the spirit of revelation. As Elder McConkie has written:

In the true Church, where there are apostles and prophets to give the mind and will and voice of the Lord to the Church and the world . . . nothing is better known or more greatly appreciated than the fact that the canon of scripture is not now and never will be full. . . . The last word has not been spoken on any subject. Streams of living water shall yet flow from the Eternal Spring who is the source of all truth. There are more things we do not know about the doctrines of salvation than there are things we do know. . . . What a wondrous thing it is to worship a God who still speaks, whose voice is still heard, whose words are without end!¹²

President Spencer W. Kimball reminded us that “there are those who would assume that with the printing and binding of these sacred records, that would be the ‘end of the prophets.’ But again we testify to the world that revelation continues and that the vaults and files of the Church contain these revelations which come month to month and day to day.”¹³

5. The fruits of the faith must reach beyond doctrinal insight; the visible Christian community must be impacted.

Joseph Smith’s vision of the kingdom of God was cosmic. It consisted of more than sermons and study and Sabbath services; it entailed the entire renovation of the order of things on earth, the transformation of humankind, and the elevation of society. And at the heart of that sublime kingdom was the doctrine of Zion, a doc-

12. Bruce R. McConkie, “A New Commandment: Save Thyself and Thy Kindred!” *Ensign*, August 1976, 7, 11.

13. Spencer W. Kimball, in Conference Report, April 1977, 115.

trine and a worldview that would shape the early Church and point the Saints of the twentieth century toward the eschatological ideal.

Joseph Smith seems to have first encountered the concept of Zion (in a sense other than the holy mount or holy city in Jerusalem) in his translation of the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon prophets spoke of Zion as a holy commonwealth, a *society* of the Saints, a *way of life* that was to be established or brought forth under God's direction; those who fought against it were to incur God's displeasure. The municipals "labor for the welfare of Zion" rather than for money. In addition, in the words of the resurrected Savior, Zion was identified as a specific *place* in the land of America, a land of promise and inheritance for the descendants of Joseph of old (see 1 Nephi 13:37; 2 Nephi 10:11–13; 26:29–31; 28:20–24; 3 Nephi 16:16–18).

Zion is spoken of in scripture as a banner, or *ensign*, around which a weary and beleaguered people may rally. It is also a *standard* against which the substance and quality of all things are to be evaluated. The Saints are expected to judge all things by a set of guidelines obtained from a source beyond that of unenlightened man. Note the language of the revelation: "Behold, I, the Lord, have made my church in these last days like unto a judge sitting on a hill, or in a high place, to judge the nations. For it shall come to pass that the inhabitants of Zion shall judge all things pertaining to Zion" (D&C 64:37–38). As an illustration of this principle, Elder Joseph Young explained that Joseph Smith the Prophet "recommended the Saints to cultivate as high a state of perfection in their musical harmonies as the standard of the faith which he had brought was superior to sectarian religion. To obtain this, he gave them to understand that the refinement of singing would depend upon the attainment of the Holy Spirit. . . . When these graces and refinements and all the kindred attractions are obtained that characterized the ancient Zion of Enoch, then the Zion of the last days will become beautiful, she will be hailed by the

Saints from the four winds, who will gather to Zion with songs of everlasting joy.”¹⁴

Zion was and is to be the focus, the convergence, and the concentration of all that is good, all that is ennobling, all that is instructive and inspirational. In Zion all things are to be gathered together as one in Christ (see Ephesians 1:10). In short, according to President Brigham Young, “every accomplishment, every polished grace, every useful attainment in mathematics, music, and in all science and art belong to the Saints.”¹⁵ The Saints “rapidly collect the intelligence that is bestowed upon the nations,” President Young said on another occasion, “for all this intelligence belongs to Zion.”¹⁶

Further, Zion is people, the people of God, people who have come out of the world of Babylon into the marvelous light of Christ. In this vein the Lord encouraged his little flock: “Verily, thus saith the Lord, let Zion rejoice, for this is Zion—THE PURE IN HEART; therefore, let Zion rejoice, while all the wicked shall mourn” (D&C 97:21). Thus, Zion is a state of being, a state of purity of heart that entitles one to be known as a member of the household of faith. President Brigham Young therefore spoke of the Saints having Zion in their hearts: “Unless the people live before the Lord in the obedience of His commandments,” he said, “they cannot have Zion within them.” Further, “As to the spirit of Zion, it is in the hearts of the Saints, of those who love and serve the Lord with all their might, mind, and strength.”¹⁷ On another occasion he affirmed: “Zion will be redeemed and built up, and the Saints will rejoice. This is the land of Zion; and *who are Zion?* The pure in heart are Zion; they have Zion within them. Purify yourselves, sanctify the Lord God in your

14. Cited in “Vocal Music,” *History of the Organization of the Seventies* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Steam Printing Establishment, 1878), 14–15.

15. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 10:224.

16. Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 8:279.

17. Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 2:253.

hearts, and have the Zion of God within you.”¹⁸ Finally, President Young asked: “*Where is Zion?* Where the organization of the Church of God is. And may it dwell spiritually in every heart; and may we so live as to always enjoy the Spirit of Zion!”¹⁹

Zion is a place. Zion is a people. Zion is a holy state of being. In the words of President Spencer W. Kimball, Zion is “the highest order of priesthood society.”²⁰ It is the heritage of the Saints. “The building up of Zion,” Joseph Smith taught, “is a cause that has interested the people of God in every age; it is a theme upon which prophets, priests and kings have dwelt with peculiar delight; they have looked forward with joyful anticipation to the day in which we live; and fired with heavenly and joyful anticipations they have sung and written and prophesied of this our day; but they died without the sight; we are the favored people that God has made choice of to bring about the latter glory.”²¹ This is the destiny of those who endure faithfully to the end. In that sense, as Joseph Smith stated, “We ought to have the building up of Zion as our greatest object.”²²

The answer to this world’s greatest concerns—be it poverty, fatherless homes, the disintegration of the nuclear family, the redefinition of marriage, or even the bickering between nations—is not to be found in social programs per se, as important as such matters can be in dealing with temporary needs. Rather, a religion that cannot assist in the transformation of the human soul can have little effect in transforming a decaying society. President Ezra Taft Benson taught: “The Lord works from the inside out. The world works from the outside in. The world would take people out of the slums. Christ takes the slums out of people, and then they take themselves out of the slums. The world would mold men by changing their environment.

18. Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 8:198; emphasis added

19. Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 8:205; emphasis added.

20. Spencer W. Kimball, in Conference Report, October 1977, 125.

21. Smith, *Teachings*, 231.

22. Smith, *Teachings*, 160.

Christ changes men, who then change their environment. The world would shape human behavior, but Christ can change human nature. . . . Yes, Christ changes men, and changed men can change the world.”²³

6. A successful world religion is one that, while holding tenaciously to its own singular and exclusive truth, maintains a healthy, affirming perspective toward other faiths.

President Howard W. Hunter explained: “The gospel of Jesus Christ, which gospel we teach and the ordinances of which we perform, is a global faith with an all-embracing message. It is neither confined nor partial nor subject to history or fashion. Its essence is universally and eternally true. Its message is for all the world, restored in these latter days to meet the fundamental needs of every nation, kindred, tongue, and people on the earth. It has been established again as it was in the beginning—to build brotherhood, to preserve truth, and to save souls.”²⁴

We have a responsibility to love and care for our neighbors and make a difference for good in their lives. There is a very real sense in which the Latter-day Saints are a part of the larger “body of Christ,” the Christian community, whether certain groups feel comfortable with acknowledging our Christianity or not. Given the challenges we face in our society, it seems so foolish for men and women who profess a belief in the Lord and Savior, whose hearts and lives have been surrendered to that Savior, to allow doctrinal differences to prevent them from working together. President Gordon B. Hinckley pleaded with us: “We can respect other religions and must do so. We must recognize the great good they accomplish. We must teach our children to be tolerant and friendly toward those not of our faith.

23. Ezra Taft Benson, in Conference Report, October 1985, 5.

24. Howard W. Hunter, “The Gospel, a Global Faith,” *Ensign*, November 1991, 18.

We can and do work with those of other religions in the defense of those values which have made our civilization great and our society distinctive.²⁵

It is my conviction that God loves us, one and all, for I believe He is our Father in Heaven and that He has tender regard for us. I also feel strongly that, in spite of growing wickedness, men and women throughout the earth are being led to greater light and knowledge, to the gradual realization of their own fallen nature and thus of their need for spiritual transformation. C. S. Lewis once stated that “There are . . . people who are slowly becoming Christians though they do not yet call themselves so. There are people who do not accept the full Christian doctrine about Christ but who are so strongly attracted by Him that they are His in a much deeper sense than they themselves understand. There are people in other regions who are being led by God’s secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity, and who thus belong to Christ without knowing it.”²⁶

I am immeasurably grateful for the fulness of the gospel—for the priesthood, for living apostles and prophets, for the ordinances of salvation, for temples and sealing powers, and for mind-expanding and liberating doctrines. But I have found myself, more and more often, looking into the eyes of those of other faiths, sensing their goodness, perceiving their commitment to God, and feeling those quiet but profound impressions bearing witness to my soul, an expanding awareness that God knows them, loves them, and desires for me to love, respect, and better understand them. The archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has observed: “Conversation may or may not lead to conversion in the sense of one party adopting the viewpoint of the other, and if we only conversed when that was our aim, we should experience nothing but very tense and polarized

25. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, April 1998, 3.

26. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 208–9.

communication in this world; . . . conversation assumes that I shall in some degree change because of the other—not by becoming the same, but simply by entering a larger world.”²⁷

“If it has been demonstrated that I have been willing to die for a ‘Mormon,’” Joseph Smith taught, “I am bold to declare before Heaven that I am just as ready to die in defending the rights of a Presbyterian, a Baptist, or a good man of any other denomination; for the same principle which would trample upon the rights of the Latter-day Saints would trample upon the rights of the Roman Catholics, or of any other denomination who may be unpopular and too weak to defend themselves.”²⁸ “If I esteem mankind to be in error,” Joseph explained, “shall I bear them down? No. I will lift them up, and in their own way too, if I cannot persuade them my way is better; and I will not seek to compel any man to believe as I do, only by the force of reasoning, for truth will cut its own way. Do you believe in Jesus Christ and the Gospel of salvation which he revealed? So do I. Christians should cease wrangling and contending with each other, and cultivate the principles of union and friendship in their midst.”²⁹

7. A vibrant world religion is able to balance its increasing membership with a focus upon spiritual spontaneity.

One of the inevitable consequences of religious groups that undergo unusual growth is a kind of institutionalization, a fossilized sterilization, what Max Weber called “the bureaucratization of charisma.” In short, they tend to become rule-driven, legalistic, and overly prone to “do things by the book.” Sadly, they lose what made them so dynamic and attractive to begin with—a reliance upon principles and a kind of spiritual flexibility, the capacity to be open to new ideas, new approaches, new understandings, all as given from on

27. Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 65.

28. Smith, *Teachings*, 313.

29. Smith, *Teachings*, 313–14.

high. Handbooks and guidelines are invaluable, but we must never quench the Spirit or become so tied to written instructions that we cannot be prompted and led in difficult decisions (see Moroni 6:9; D&C 46:2).

Elder Boyd K. Packer offered the following counsel in 1984:

Organization, programs, procedures, policies, and principles—all are important. But they are not of equal importance. Leaders may very well spend time and budget on things that are not crucial and actually neglect the weightier matters. . . .

If a leader does not know the *principles*—by principles I mean the principles of the gospel, the doctrines, what’s in the revelations—if he does not know what the revelations say about justice or mercy, or what they reveal on reproof or forgiveness, how can he make inspired decisions in those difficult cases that require his judgment? . . .

There are principles of the gospel underlying every phase of Church administration. These are not explained in the handbooks. They are found in the scriptures. They are the substance of and the purpose for the revelations.

Procedures, programs, the administrative policies, even some patterns of organization are subject to change. The First Presidency are quite free, indeed quite obliged, to alter them from time to time. But the *principles*, the *doctrines*, *never* change. If we overemphasize programs and procedures that *can* change, and will change, and must change, and do not understand the fundamental principles of the gospel, which *never* change, we can be misled. . . .

Now, I do not imply that we should ignore the handbooks or manuals; not for one minute would I say that. What I do say is this: There is a spiritual ingredient not found in handbooks that we must include in our ministry if we are to please the Lord.³⁰

30. Boyd K. Packer, “Principles” (address given at regional representatives seminar, April 1984), in *The Things of the Soul* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 64–66; emphasis in original.

As to how the Church can maintain a personal touch, a one-by-one ministry with continued Church growth and expansion, President Packer remarked several years later:

Actually the Church is no bigger than a ward. Each bishop has counselors. He wears a special mantle and is designated as the presiding high priest in the ward. There are other high priests, and there is a presidency of elders. There are auxiliary leaders and teachers sufficient for the need. When we serve obediently, ever willingly, our pay, like the bishop's, comes in blessings.

No matter if the Church grows to be a hundred million (as it surely will!), it will still be no bigger than a ward. Everything needed for our redemption, save for the temple, is centered there—and temples now come ever closer to all of us.³¹

8. A world religion must somehow engender a deep sense of commitment and loyalty among its members.

What are some of the reasons for Church growth? What generally attracts people to the Church? Many people in the world, weary of moral decline and what they perceive to be an erosion of time-honored values, are drawn to a church and a people who seem to be, as one journalist put it, “a repository of old-fashioned values, an American success story.”³² Latter-day Saints hold to absolute truths concerning God, man, and right and wrong. And, as we have pointed out, the Latter-day Saint doctrines concerning God's plan for His children, as well as the answers to such dilemmas as where we came from, why we are here, and where we are going—these things appeal to large numbers of men and women who are searching for meaning in life and for answers to the perplexities of our existence. The focus on the family is refreshing and badly overdue in a world that seems to be drifting rapidly from its moorings.

31. Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, April 1999, 79; emphasis added.

32. Peter Steinfels, “Despite Growth, Mormons Find New Hurdles,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1991, sec. 1, p. 1.

Though it may seem odd at first glance, there is another reason why the Church is growing so rapidly—because of the requirements and the demands it makes upon its members. “Let us here observe,” the early Saints were taught, “that a religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation.”³³ In other words, a religion that does not ask anything of its congregants can promise very little to them. Easy religion and convenient theology are not satisfying to the soul. People yearn for something to which they can commit themselves completely, something worthy of their devotion and their investment of time, talents, and means. It is worth noting, therefore, that recent studies in the sociology of religion indicate that the religious organizations that are growing the fastest are, ironically, those whose costs of membership—material, social, and spiritual—are greater. The greater the investment in terms of participation and involvement, the greater the sticking power and the attractiveness to the seeker of truth.³⁴

9. The spirit and legacy of the founder of the faith must remain central to the Church. At the same time, the members must demonstrate an intelligent loyalty to the founder’s successors.

While we thank God for living apostles and prophets today—for seers and revelators who see things not visible to the natural eye (see Moses 6:36)—we build upon a foundation laid by the Prophet Joseph Smith and by the revelations and heavenly powers communicated to him. Joseph Smith stands in a singular position to the Latter-day Saints: our worship is reserved for the members of the Godhead, but a special form of respect and loyalty is extended to Brother Joseph. He is what might be called a prophet’s prophet. The

33. Joseph Smith, comp., *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 69.

34. Roger Finke and Roger Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–1990* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 255.

Prophet Joseph Smith taught us that the head of the kingdom of God is Jesus Christ, the Great High Priest of our profession. We learn that Michael (Adam) and Gabriel (Noah) come next in line of authority. Although we are not told who comes next, we would suppose that the dispensation heads would follow.

A dispensation is a period of time in which God reveals Himself, His beloved Son, and the plan of life and salvation to men and women on earth. Such direction comes through the dispensation head, the man called to serve as the preeminent prophetic revealer of Christ. My guess is that there have always been testimony meetings, even from the beginning of time. I suppose it would not have been unusual to listen to a testimony meeting in 3000 BC and hear the following: "I know that God lives, that Jehovah is His Son, and that Enoch is His chosen prophet." If we had attended a testimony meeting in 1800 BC, we might have heard the following: "I have a testimony that God our Heavenly Father lives, that Jesus Christ is the Messiah and Savior, and that Abraham is His prophet." Interesting, isn't it? We hear testimony borne of God and His Son and then of the dispensation head almost in the same breath, and this is as it should be. God sends subsequent prophets during that dispensation, and each of these is a powerful and special witness of Christ and a mighty man of God; at the same time, their testimonies and witnesses are echoes and mirrors of the testimony first borne by the dispensation head.

In a magnificent address delivered to the Church at the April 1916 general conference, President Joseph F. Smith spoke of the link, the vital link, between Joseph Smith, the founder of the faith, and the current Church and its leaders:

I feel sure that the Prophet Joseph Smith and his associates, who, under the guidance and inspiration of the Almighty, and by his power, began this latter-day work, would rejoice and do rejoice, if they are permitted to look down upon the scene that I behold in this tabernacle. And I believe they do have the privilege of looking down upon us, just as the all-seeing eye of God beholds every part of his handiwork. . . .

So, I feel quite confident that the eyes of Joseph the Prophet, and of the martyrs of this dispensation, and of Brigham and John and Wilford, and those faithful men who were associated with them in their ministry upon the earth, are carefully guarding the interests of the Kingdom of God in which they labored and for which they strove during their mortal lives. I believe they are as deeply interested in our welfare today, if not with greater capacity, with far more interest, behind the veil, than they were in the flesh. . . . And I have a feeling in my heart that I stand in the presence not only of the Father and of the Son, but in the presence of those whom God commissioned, raised up, and inspired, to lay the foundations of the work in which we are engaged.³⁵

In writing of this pivotal moment in Church history, Jan Shipps observed:

President Smith knew that the fifteen years of his presidency had been hard years for the Latter-day Saints. . . . He knew that they were worried about what had happened in the Church as well as to the Church and that they were concerned about the changes that were rushing in upon the Mormon world. Therefore, instead of delivering a sentimental homily about the founders of the Church and the trials they had endured, he delivered 'a remarkable sermon' that had continuity as one of its main themes. This was a sermon that the Saints very much needed to hear. . . .

Couched in a manner that makes it applicable in all times and in diverse places, Joseph F. Smith's sermon called up the sacred past and brought it forward to vindicate the present. Just as surely as the early Christian canon, in order to establish a correspondence between two apparently different eras, brought the Hebraic past into the Christian present . . . , so the Prophet-President's sermon established a basis for a metaphysical bonding between the nineteenth-century Mormon experience and its distinctly dissimilar twentieth-century counterpart.

35. *Messages of the First Presidency*, 5:5–6.

In short, “Joseph F. Smith conveyed to the Saints his confidence that the changes which had occurred during his tenure were not changes which had in any way diminished the strength of the relationship between God and His chosen people. Notwithstanding shifting times and seasons, Mormonism remained the same.”³⁶

Now, having acknowledged the role of the dispensation head—and in this case the significant labor of Brother Joseph—we readily acknowledge that ours is a forward-looking Church and that we do not dwell constantly upon what was or even forevermore on *how* it was done. Elder Bruce R. McConkie explained:

The Lord, in his infinite wisdom and goodness, knows what ought to be done with his servants. The other thing to note is that when the Lord calls a new prophet he does it because he has a work and a labor and a mission for the new man to perform.

I can suppose that when the Prophet Joseph Smith was taken from this life the Saints felt themselves in the depths of despair. To think that a leader of such spiritual magnitude had been taken from them! . . . And yet when he was taken the Lord had Brigham Young. Brigham Young stepped forth and wore the mantle of leadership. With all respect and admiration and every accolade of praise resting upon the Prophet Joseph, still Brigham Young came forward and did things that then had to be done in a better way than the Prophet Joseph himself could have done them.³⁷

10. The great strength of a world religion lies in the individual witness of its members.

“Herein lies the great strength of this kingdom,” President Hinckley said. “It is the conviction, solid and real and personal, that is found in the hearts of millions of Latter-day Saints who live in

36. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 138–45.

37. Bruce R. McConkie, “Succession in the Presidency,” *1974 BYU Speeches of the Year* (Provo, UT: BYU Publications, 1975), 24.

many lands and who speak a variety of tongues. Each is a part of a great society of believers.”³⁸ President Brigham Young is reported to have said that his greatest fear was that the members of this Church would settle into a kind of spiritual complacency and accept everything the Brethren said and did without obtaining a witness of its truthfulness for themselves.³⁹ It is intelligent obedience, not “blind obedience” that the Lord and His prophets need from the Saints; such obedience lends strength and power and dynamism to the work of the Lord. In other words, while it is essential that we are led by fifteen men who have been called, ordained, and set apart as special witnesses of the name of Christ in all the world, the true strength of this Church lies in the hearts of its members.

There is an episode in the Old Testament that underlines the importance of enlightened and thus empowered members. On one occasion Moses gathered together the seventy elders of Israel “round about the tabernacle.” Jehovah descended in a cloud, spoke to Moses, and poured out His Spirit upon the seventy. Eldad and Medad were overcome with that Spirit and prophesied. Joshua became concerned and anxiously said to the Lawgiver: “My Lord Moses, forbid them. And Moses said unto him, Enviest thou for my sake?” That is, “What’s the matter, Joshua? Are you afraid they will take my job as prophet-leader?” And then followed immortal words, language that has everlasting relevance to those who seek to know the mind and will of the Almighty: “*Would God that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them*” (Numbers 11:24–29; emphasis added; compare D&C 1:19–20).

One of the remarkable attributes of God and of His chosen prophets is that they are not possessive of spiritual gifts or graces; it is as though Joseph Smith and his prophetic successors have bidden

38. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 133.

39. Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye in Holy Places* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), 163; see also *Journal of Discourses*, 6:100; 9:149–50.

us to brush away the cobwebs of complacency, open the shutters of heaven, and gaze with them upon the scenes of eternity. Thus, the Choice Seer could affirm that “God hath not revealed anything to Joseph, but what He will make known to the Twelve, and even the least Saint may know all things as fast as he is able to bear them.”⁴⁰

The testimony of Jesus, that which undergirds this latter-day work, is in fact the spirit of prophecy (see Revelation 19:10). My colleague Joseph Fielding McConkie wrote: “Our faith and our doctrine is that every member of the Church has both the ability and responsibility to be a prophet. To join the Church is but to enroll in the school of the prophets. . . . Our doctrine is not simply that if we live righteously we can receive revelation; rather it is that if we live right there is no power that can prevent our receiving it.” In addition, just as our dispensation stands independent of all previous dispensations, “all who would lay claim to the promise of salvation must do so as prophets or prophetesses. Each must claim a personal dispensation of the gospel. All who profess a testimony of the gospel must have a knowledge of saving truths that stands independent of the revelations given to others.”⁴¹

Conclusion

Try to imagine how a small group of Latter-day Saints must have felt as they gathered together at the home of Peter Whitmer Sr. for the formal organization of the Church on April 6, 1830. Try to imagine what went through the minds of the early missionaries as they were told by revelation that “the voice of the Lord is unto all men, and there is none to escape; and there is no eye that shall not see, neither ear that shall not hear, neither heart that shall not be penetrated. . . . And the voice of warning shall be unto all people, by the mouths of my disciples, whom I have chosen in these last days”

40. Smith, *Teachings*, 149.

41. Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Prophets and Prophecy* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 90–91.

(D&C 1:2, 4). Try to imagine the wonder and amazement that must have overcome the little flock as they were instructed that “the sound must go forth from this place unto all the world, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth—the gospel must be preached unto every creature, with signs following them that believe” (D&C 58:64). Truly, the arm of the Lord would be revealed “in convincing the nations . . . of the gospel of their salvation. For it shall come to pass in that day, that every man shall hear the fulness of the gospel in his own tongue, and in his own language, through those who are ordained unto this power” (D&C 90:10–11).

President Wilford Woodruff described an early meeting of the Saints in Kirtland:

On Sunday night the Prophet called on all who held the Priesthood to gather into the little log school house they had there. It was a small house, perhaps 14 feet square. But it held the whole of the Priesthood of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who were then in the town of Kirtland, and who had gathered together to go off in Zion’s camp. . . . When we got together the Prophet called upon the Elders of Israel with him to bear testimony of this work. Those that I have named spoke, and a good many that I have not named, bore their testimonies. When they got through the Prophet said, “Brethren I have been very much edified and instructed in your testimonies here tonight, but I want to say to you before the Lord, that you know no more concerning the destinies of this Church and kingdom than a babe upon its mother’s lap. You don’t comprehend it.” I was rather surprised. He said “it is only a little handful of Priesthood you see here tonight, but this Church will fill North and South America; it will fill the world.”⁴²

The little stone foreseen by Nebuchadnezzar and interpreted by Daniel was being cut out of the mountain “without hands,” meaning, without human hands; it was an act of God. The foundation was laid for the establishment of the kingdom of God, a kingdom that would never be lost from the earth through apostasy, a kingdom that would

42. Wilford Woodruff, in Conference Report, April 1898, 57.

expand and be sanctified until the pure in heart were prepared to welcome to the earth the King of Zion (see Moses 7:53), the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. While we speak often of living in the last days, of being a part of the winding up scenes in the eleventh hour, there is yet much to do: many, many millions must yet join the Church and gather to holy temples throughout the globe (see Revelation 5:9–10); the Saints must put their lives (including their financial resources) in order so that “the church may stand independent above all other creatures beneath the celestial world” (D&C 78:14); and, finally, we must so center our lives in Jesus Christ and His gospel that the tinsel, trappings, and tauntings of our telestial world will have little or no effect on us; like Nephi, we will give them no heed whatsoever (see 1 Nephi 8:33).

It is reported that Count Leo Tolstoi once observed, “If the [Latter-day Saints] follow the teachings of this Church, nothing can stop their progress—it will be limitless. There have been great movements started in the past but they have died or been modified before they reached maturity. If Mormonism is able to endure, unmodified, until it reaches the third and fourth generation, it is destined to become the greatest power the world has ever known.”⁴³

President Hinckley asked:

Now, what of the future? What of the years that lie ahead? It looks promising indeed. People are beginning to see us for what we are and for the values we espouse. The media generally treat us well. We enjoy a good reputation, for which we are grateful.

If we will go forward, never losing sight of our goal, speaking ill of no one, living the great principles we know to be true, this cause will roll on in majesty and power to fill the earth. Doors now closed to the preaching of the gospel will be opened. The Almighty, if necessary, may have to shake the nations to

43. Cited in Thomas J. Yates, “Count Tolstoi and the ‘American Religion,’” *Improvement Era*, February 1939, 94.

humble them and cause them to listen to the servants of the living God. Whatever is needed will come to pass.⁴⁴

In another address President Hinckley said:

The time has come for us to stand a little taller, to lift our eyes and stretch our minds to a greater comprehension and understanding of the grand millennial mission of this, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This is a season to be strong. It is a time to move forward without hesitation, knowing well the meaning, the breadth, and the importance of our mission. . . . We have nothing to fear. God is at the helm. He will overrule for the good of this work. . . . No force under the heavens can stop it if we will walk in righteousness and be faithful and true. The Almighty Himself is at our head.⁴⁵

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44. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, October 1997, 92.

45. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, April 1995, 95.