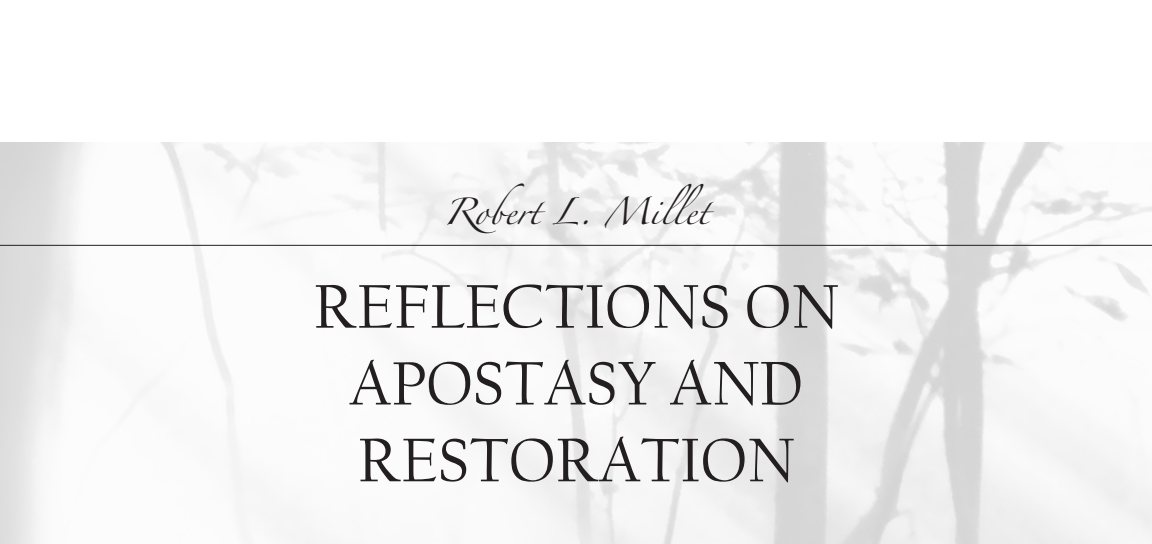




President Boyd K. Packer taught, "The idea that with the Crucifixion of Christ the heavens were closed and they opened in the First Vision is not true. . . . The Holy Ghost would visit seeking souls. The prayers of the righteous would not go unanswered." (© 2001 Intellectual Reserve, Inc. All rights reserved.)



Robert L. Millet

REFLECTIONS ON APOSTASY AND RESTORATION

Because Latter-day Saints believe in an apostasy and eventual restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ to the earth, it is too easy for us to speak in vague generalities as though “the lights went out” in AD 100 and did not come on again until 1820. What exactly is the Great Apostasy? What do we believe was lost during the centuries following the deaths of Jesus Christ and his Apostles? Are we, as Latter-day Saints, to assume that everything spoken, written, or declared on religious or spiritual matters for seventeen centuries is suspect, questionable, or patently false? This chapter suggests what it means to say that the restored Church is “the only true and living church on the face of the whole earth” (D&C 1:30) and what it does not.

MANY years ago when addressing a group of faculty and students at a university in the East, I made a fifty-minute presentation on “the Christ of the Latter-day Saints.” Questions and answers followed. One faculty member made a comment early in the Q & A session: “I do have questions for you, but frankly I have great difficulty taking seriously any religious group that dismisses out of hand two thousand years of Christian history.” His question sobered me at the time, and it still haunts me. It has elicited in my mind a host of issues: Do Latter-day Saints in fact dismiss the whole of Christian history as “apostate”? Is such a position necessary in light of a belief in a restoration of the gospel? Is it the case that “the lights went out” in AD 100 and did not come on again until 1820? Was this period of time actually the “Dark Ages” in the sense that no

spiritual light, no sacred truth, no divine manifestations were had or enjoyed by men and women for some seventeen centuries?

Some years after that experience I was in Pasadena, California, with a Baptist colleague to conduct a program that came to be known as “A Mormon and an Evangelical in Dialogue.” We had completed our conversation (about ninety minutes) before a group of around 1,500 people and then invited questions from the audience. One full-time LDS missionary seated near the front of the chapel arose and said: “This question is for Brother Millet. I simply want to clarify something. The Book of Mormon teaches that there are really only two churches—the church of the Lamb of God and the church of the devil [1 Nephi 14:10]. Now, to me that means that the Latter-day Saints are the church of the Lamb and all other people are a part of the church of the devil. Is that correct?” I tried to be sensitive, to respond in a way that wouldn’t hurt feelings but would also correct what I believed to be a major misconception.

“The Only True Church”

In the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants, a revelation given to Joseph Smith in November 1831, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is in fact referred to as “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth” (D&C 1:30). Admittedly, this is strong language; it is hard doctrine, words that are offensive to persons of other faiths. It may be helpful to consider briefly what the phrase “the only true and living church” means and what it does *not* mean. In what follows, I offer my own views, my own perspective. First, let’s deal with what the phrase does *not* mean.

1. It does not mean that men and women of other Christian faiths are not sincere believers in truth and genuine followers of the Christ. Latter-day Saints have no difficulty whatsoever accepting others’ personal affirmations that they are Christian, that they acknowledge Jesus Christ as the divine Son of God, their Savior, the

Lord and Master of their life. Nor are Latter-day Saints the only ones entitled to personal illumination and divine guidance for their lives.

2. It does not mean we believe that most of the doctrines in Catholic or Protestant Christianity are false or that the leaders of the various branches of Christianity have improper motives. Joseph Smith stated: "The inquiry is frequently made of me, 'Wherein do you differ from others in your religious views?' In reality and essence we do not differ so far in our religious views, but that we could all drink into one principle of love. One of the grand fundamental principles of 'Mormonism' is to receive truth, let it come from whence it may."¹ "Have the Presbyterians any truth?" he asked on another occasion. "Yes. Have the Baptists, Methodists, etc., any truth? Yes. . . . We should gather all the good and true principles in the world and treasure them up, or we shall not come out true 'Mormons.'"² President George Albert Smith thus declared to those of other faiths: "We have come not to take away from you the truth and virtue you possess. We have come not to find fault with you nor to criticize you. We have not come here to berate you. . . . Keep all the good that you have, and *let us bring to you more good.*"³

3. It does not mean that the Bible has been so corrupted that it cannot be relied upon to teach us sound doctrine and provide an example of how to live. Elder M. Russell Ballard, in speaking of "the miracle of the Holy Bible," observed, "It is a miracle that the Bible literally contains within its pages the converting, healing Spirit of Christ, which has turned men's hearts for centuries, leading them to pray, to choose right paths, and to search to find their Savior." Further, "It is not by chance or coincidence that we have the Bible today. Righteous individuals were prompted by the Spirit to record both the sacred things they saw and the inspired words they heard and spoke. Other devoted people were prompted to protect and preserve these records. Men like John Wycliffe, the courageous William Tyndale, and Johannes Gutenberg were prompted against much opposition to translate the Bible into language people could understand and

to publish it in books people could read. I believe even the scholars of King James had spiritual promptings in their translation work.”⁴ While Latter-day Saints do not subscribe to a doctrine of scriptural inerrancy, we do believe that the hand of God has been over the preservation of the biblical materials such that what we have now is what the Almighty would have us possess. In the words of Elder Bruce R. McConkie, “We cannot avoid the conclusion that a divine providence is directing all things as they should be. This means that the Bible, as it now is, contains that portion of the Lord’s word” that the present world is prepared to receive.⁵

In a revelation received in February 1831 that embraces “the law of the Church,” the early Saints were instructed, “And again, the elders, priests and teachers of this church shall teach the principles of my gospel, which are *in the Bible and the Book of Mormon, in the which is the fulness of the gospel*” (D&C 42:12; emphasis added). In 1982 Elder McConkie explained to Church leaders, “Before we can write the gospel in our own book of life we must learn the gospel as it is written in the books of scripture. The Bible, the Book of Mormon, [the Pearl of Great Price,] and the Doctrine and Covenants—*each of them individually and all of them collectively—contain the fulness of the everlasting gospel.*”⁶

While Latter-day Saints do not believe that one can derive divine authority to perform the saving ordinances from the scriptures, we do say that the Bible contains the fulness of the gospel in the sense that (1) it teaches of groups of people in the past who enjoyed the full blessings of the everlasting gospel and (2) it teaches (especially in the New Testament) the good news or glad tidings of redemption in Christ through the Atonement (see 3 Nephi 27:13–21; D&C 76:40–42).

4. It does not mean that God disapproves of or rejects all that devoted Christians are teaching or doing, where their heart is, and what they hope to accomplish in the religious world. “God, the Father of us all,” President Ezra Taft Benson said, “uses the men of

the earth, especially good men, to accomplish his purposes. It has been true in the past, it is true today, it will be true in the future.” President Benson then quoted the following from a conference address delivered by Elder Orson F. Whitney in 1928: “Perhaps the Lord needs such men on the outside of His Church to help it along. They are among its auxiliaries, and can do more good for the cause where the Lord has placed them, than anywhere else.” Now, note this particularly poignant message: “*God is using more than one people for the accomplishment of His great and marvelous work. The Latter-day Saints cannot do it all. It is too vast, too arduous for any one people.*” Elder Whitney then pointed out that we have no warfare with other churches. “They are our partners in a certain sense.”⁷

In June of 1829, Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer were instructed, “Contend against no church, save it be the church of the devil” (D&C 18:20). Elder B. H. Roberts offered this insightful commentary upon this passage:

I understand the injunction to Oliver Cowdery to “contend against no church, save it be the church of the devil” (D&C 18:20), to mean that he shall contend against evil, against untruth, against all combinations of wicked men. They constitute the church of the devil, the kingdom of evil, a federation of unrighteousness; and the servants of God have a right to contend against that which is evil, let it appear where it will. . . . But, let it be understood, we are not brought necessarily into antagonism with the various sects of Christianity as such. So far as they have retained fragments of Christian truth—and each of them has some measure of truth—that far they are acceptable unto the Lord; and it would be poor policy for us to contend against them without discrimination. . . . *[O]ur relationship to the religious world is not one that calls for the denunciation of sectarian churches as composing the church of the devil.*

The following remarks from Elder Roberts demonstrate the kind of breadth necessary in reaching out and understanding our brothers and sisters of other faiths:

All that makes for untruth, for unrighteousness constitutes the kingdom of evil—the church of the devil. All that makes for truth, for righteousness, is of God; it constitutes the kingdom of righteousness—the empire of Jehovah; and, in a certain sense at least, constitutes the Church of Christ. With . . . the kingdom of righteousness we have no warfare. On the contrary both the spirit of the Lord’s commandments to His servants and the dictates of right reason would suggest that we seek to enlarge this kingdom of righteousness both by recognizing such truths as it possesses and seeking the friendship and cooperation of the righteous men and women who constitute its membership.⁸

5. Our belief that we are “the only true and living church” does not mean that Latter-day Saints desire to “do our own thing” or face social challenges on their own. To be sure, we strive earnestly to work together with men and women of other faiths to stand up and speak out against the rising tide of immorality and ethical relativism that is spreading in our world. With most Christian groups, we are persuaded that the changes to be made in our society can only come about “from the inside out”—through the transforming powers of Jesus Christ. Indeed, I am convinced that if we allow doctrinal differences, stereotyping, and demonizing of those who are different to prevent us from joining hands in halting the erosion of time-honored moral and family values, Lucifer will win a major victory.

What, then, does the revelation mean when it states that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth”?

1. “The word *only*,” Elder Neal A. Maxwell has written, “asserts a uniqueness and singularity” about the Church “as the exclusive ecclesiastical, authority-bearing agent for our Father in heaven in this dispensation.”⁹

“When the Lord used the designation *true*,” Elder Maxwell pointed out, he implied that

the doctrines of the Church and its authority are not just partially true, but true as measured by divine standards. The Church is not, therefore, conceptually compromised by having been made up from doctrinal debris left over from another age, nor is it comprised of mere fragments of the true faith. It is based upon the *fulness* of the gospel of him whose *name* it bears, thus passing the two tests for proving his church that were given by Jesus during his visit to the Nephites. (3 Nephi 27:8)

“When the word *living* is used,” Elder Maxwell observed, “it carries a divinely deliberate connotation. The Church is neither dead nor dying, nor is it even wounded. The Church, like the living God who established it, is alive, aware, and functioning. It is not a museum that houses a fossilized faith; rather, it is a kinetic kingdom characterized by living faith in living disciples.”¹⁰

2. It means that 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, or exegete a scriptural passage in a myriad of ways,

resulting in interpretations as diverse as the backgrounds, training, and proclivities of the persons involved. 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 confidence in settling [his religious questions] 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 such matters as whether God is completely sovereign over all things or whether he limits his control by allowing freedom of the will; whether only the predestined are saved or whether all have the potential for full salvation; whether the unevangelized are forever damned or whether they will have an opportunity eventually to learn the message of Christ; whether baptism is essential to salvation and how and to whom it must be administered; whether the gifts of the Spirit ceased with the Apostles or to what extent they should be enjoyed today; whether women should serve in certain ministerial capacities; whether hell consists of eternal torment and suffering or whether immortality is a conditional blessing: those who reject Christ and his gospel are simply annihilated hereafter; whether man plays a role in his own salvation beyond an initial confession of Christ as Savior; whether one can accept Jesus as Savior but postpone until later a profession of him as Lord and Master; and whether all saved beings enjoy the highest rewards in heaven hereafter.¹¹

Some of these matters are not exactly insignificant. Who decides which interpretation is that which Matthew or Paul or Jesus himself 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 of God who spoke or wrote anciently as they were moved upon by the Holy Spirit (see 2 Peter 1:21)? While each reader of holy writ should seek to be in tune with the Spirit enough to understand what is intended by

the scripture, Latter-day Saints believe 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.”¹²

In writing of *sola scriptura* as a tenet of the Reformation, Randall Balmer 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.

“Underlying this insistence on individual interpretation,” Balmer continues, “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 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.”¹³

Abominable Creeds

We are told in the 1838 account of the First Vision that Joseph learned that “all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: ‘they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof’” (Joseph Smith—History 1:19). This statement is, of course, considered to be harsh and hurtful to members of other Christian churches. Let’s see if we can clarify things somewhat. For example, what were the “creeds” spoken of? Originally the Latin word *credo* meant simply “I believe.” In Joseph Smith’s day, the word *creed* referred to “a brief summary of the articles of Christian faith”

or “that which is believed.”¹⁴ A modern dictionary defines a creed as “a system of religious belief” or “a set of opinions or principles on any subject” or “belief or confidence in; an article of faith.”¹⁵ As here defined, there is nothing wrong with a creed per se.

Alexander Campbell, a contemporary of Joseph Smith and the father of the Disciples of Christ and Church of Christ movements, was one who was particularly troubled by creeds. “Following the American Revolution,” Milton V. Backman Jr. noted, “a number of theologians vehemently condemned all the popular creeds of Christendom. Urging all disciples of Christ to return to the purity of New Testament Christianity, these preachers taught that the Bible should be regarded as the only standard of faith, that every congregation should be autonomous, and that all men are endowed with the capacity to accept or reject God’s gift of salvation. Although these resolute leaders were divided concerning the doctrine of the Godhead, they rejected the use of the term ‘Trinity,’ claiming that such a word was unscriptural.”¹⁶

Joseph Smith was not necessarily opposed to religious creeds in general. In the preface to the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants (1835) is this fascinating remark: “There may be an aversion in the minds of some against receiving any thing purporting to be articles of religious faith, in consequence of there being so many now extant; but if men believe a system, and profess that it was given by inspiration, certainly, the more intelligibly they can present it, the better. It does not make a principle untrue to print it, neither does it make it true not to print it.” As an example, Elder McConkie stated that the fifth Lecture on Faith “in effect, *is a creed announcing who Deity is*. In my judgment, it is the most comprehensive, intelligent, inspired utterance that now exists in the English language—that exists in one place defining, interpreting, expounding, announcing, and testifying what kind of being God is.”¹⁷

Latter-day Saints believe that the creeds spoken of in the First Vision were the post–New Testament creeds that sought to codify

beliefs concerning God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and their relationships—concepts that had evolved during the time following the deaths of the original Apostles. To the extent that creeds perpetuate falsehood, particularly concerning the nature of the Godhead, then of course our Father in Heaven would be displeased with them. To the extent that creeds divide people, categorize people, exclude people, and even lead others to persecute them, one can appreciate why they would be viewed as undesirable. To the extent that they become a badge of belonging, the identifying mark by which a “true Christian” is known, the only way by which one can understand what the scriptures really mean about God and Christ—then to that extent the Christian circle is drawn smaller and smaller and the grace of God that makes salvation available to all humankind is frustrated (see Titus 2:11).

It may well be that God the Father and the Prophet Joseph were just as concerned with *creedalism* as they were with incorrect doctrine within the creeds. Two Christian writers have observed: “The early Church creeds were motivated more by political than theological concerns. As William Penn is credited with saying, ‘Persecution entered with creed-making.’ *Like-mindedness became a requirement rather than a goal.* Orthodoxy, not love and grace, became the central focus.” Further, “The saved were those Christians who shared our doctrinal creed. *It wasn’t enough to claim you were Christian. You had to be the right kind of Christian, a faithful adherent of our religious code.* Those within this tight circle were our brothers and sisters, and we were obliged to love them. Those outside our church, denomination, or religion were unsaved.”¹⁸

The Apostle Paul affirmed that our Savior “will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). This is what the Prophet Joseph had in mind when he stated in October 1843, “I cannot believe in any of the creeds of the different denominations, because they all have some things in them I cannot subscribe to, though all of them have some truth. I want to come up

into the presence of God, and learn all things; but the creeds set up stakes, and say, ‘Hitherto shalt thou come, and no further’; which I cannot subscribe to.”¹⁹

The “professors” mentioned in the First Vision seem to be the antagonistic ministers in Joseph Smith’s immediate surroundings. After describing the response of a Methodist minister to his First Vision that “it was all of the devil, that there were no such things as visions or revelations in these days; that all such things had ceased with the apostles, and that there would never be any more of them,” Joseph reported, “I soon found, however, that *my telling the story had excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion*, and was the cause of great persecution, which continued to increase; . . . and this was common among all the sects” (Joseph Smith—History 1:21–22; emphasis added). In an account of the First Vision found in the Wentworth Letter (1842), Joseph indicates that “They [the Father and Son] told me that *all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines*, and that none of them was acknowledged of God as His Church and kingdom: and I was expressly commanded to ‘go not after them,’ at the same time receiving a promise that the fulness of the Gospel should at some future time be made known unto me.”²⁰

Elder William Grant Bangerter once asked students and faculty at BYU:

Do we believe that all ministers of other churches are corrupt? Of course not. Joseph Smith certainly did not intend that. By reading the passage carefully, we find that the Lord Jesus Christ was referring to those ministers who were quarreling and arguing about which church was true—that is, the particular group with which Joseph Smith was involved. . . .

It is clearly apparent that there have been and now are many choice, honorable, and devoted men and women going in the direction of their eternal salvation who give righteous

and conscientious leadership to their congregations in other churches. Joseph Smith evidently had many warm and friendly contacts with ministers of other religions. Quite a few of them joined the Church: Sidney Rigdon, John Taylor, Parley P. Pratt, and others in America and England. Some of them who carried the Christian attitude of tolerance did not join the Church. There are many others like them today.²¹

“At some level, Joseph’s revelations indicate a loss of trust in the Christian ministry,” Richard L. Bushman has written. “For all their learning and their eloquence, the clergy could not be trusted with the Bible. They did not understand what the book meant. It was a record of revelations, and the ministry had turned it into a handbook. The Bible had become a text to be interpreted rather than an experience to be lived. In the process, the power of the book was lost. . . . It was the power thereof that Joseph and the other visionaries of his time sought to recover. Not getting it from the ministry, they looked for it themselves.

“To me,” Bushman continues,

that is Joseph Smith’s significance for our time. He stood on the contested ground where the Enlightenment and Christianity confronted one another, and his life posed the question, Do you believe God speaks? Joseph was swept aside, of course, in the rush of ensuing intellectual battles and was disregarded by the champions of both great systems, but his mission was to hold out for the reality of divine revelation and establish one small outpost where that principle survived. Joseph’s revelatory principle is not a single revelation serving for all time, as the Christians of his day believed regarding the incarnation of Christ, nor a mild sort of inspiration seeping into the minds of all good people, but specific, ongoing directions from God to his people. At a time when the origins

of Christianity were under assault by the forces of Enlightenment rationality, Joseph Smith returned modern Christianity to its origins in revelation.²²

The “More” of Mormonism

Again, I believe it is a gross exaggeration and misrepresentation to suggest that Latter-day Saints believe all of Christian practice and doctrine since the time of the original Apostles has been apostate. Noble and God-fearing men and women who lived through the period that too many have termed the “Dark Ages” sought to do good and maintain the tenets of Christianity to the best of their ability. President John Taylor declared that there were persons during medieval times who “could commune with God, and who, by the power of faith, could draw aside the curtain of eternity and gaze upon the invisible world . . . , have the ministering of angels, and unfold the future destinies of the world. If those were dark ages I pray God to give me a little darkness, and deliver me from the light and intelligence that prevail in our day.”²³ President Brigham Young explained that many good men before the time of Joseph Smith’s call enjoyed “the spirit of revelation” and specifically noted that John Wesley was as good a man as lived on earth.²⁴

In speaking of the primitive Church, President Boyd K. Packer observed that “the flame flickered and dimmed. . . . But always, as it had from the beginning, the Spirit of God inspired worthy souls. We owe an immense debt to the protesters and the reformers who preserved the scriptures and translated them. They knew something had been lost. They kept the flame alive as best they could. Many of them were martyrs.”²⁵ On another occasion he taught: “The line of priesthood authority was broken. But *mankind was not left in total darkness or completely without revelation or inspiration*. The idea that with the Crucifixion of Christ the heavens were closed and they opened in the First Vision is not true. The Light of Christ would be everywhere present to attend the children of God; the Holy Ghost would visit seeking



President Boyd K. Packer taught, "The line of priesthood authority was broken. But mankind was not left in total darkness or completely without revelation or inspiration." (Kenneth Riley, The Restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood, © 1965 Intellectual Reserve, Inc.)

souls. The prayers of the righteous would not go unanswered."²⁶ Similarly, Elder Dallin H. Oaks explained: "We are indebted to the men and women who kept the light of faith and learning alive through the centuries to the present day. We have only to contrast the lesser light that exists among peoples unfamiliar with the names of God and Jesus Christ to realize the great contribution made by Christian teachers through the ages. We honor them as servants of God."²⁷

Elder Alexander B. Morrison has written: “The view that changes in the early church resulted in the descent of a blanket of stygian darkness over the entire earth such that humankind had no contact with God or the Spirit for nearly two millennia simply doesn’t stand up to the scrutiny of modern scholarship. Scholars of today, benefiting from perspectives and information not readily available a century ago, understand that the ‘Dark Ages’ were not nearly so dark as previously had been thought.”²⁸

President Young declared: “We, the Latter-day Saints, take the liberty of believing more than our Christian brethren: we not only believe . . . the Bible, but . . . the whole of the plan of salvation that Jesus has given to us. *Do we differ from others who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? No, only in believing more.*”²⁹ How so? What is, in fact, the “more” of Mormonism?

1. *Restored divine authority.* As suggested earlier, one of the foundational teachings of Mormonism is that divine authority, known as the holy priesthood, was lost sometime following the deaths of the original Apostles. This authority, including its keys—the directing power, the right of presidency—was necessary anciently to perform saving ordinances or sacraments, to oversee the performance of such sacraments, to properly interpret and propagate sound doctrine, and in general to officiate in and regulate the affairs of the Church. The restoration of divine authority through Joseph Smith in 1829 was therefore necessary in order that the restored Church might be built upon the foundation of apostles and prophets, “Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:19–20).

2. *Doctrinal perspective.* Latter-day Saints believe that many of the truths restored through Joseph Smith provide a grander and more elevated perspective on life. For example, to believe that men and women existed before they were born into mortality has immense implications for life here—our joys, our friendships and associations, our likes and dislikes, and our challenges and suffering. Also, consider what difference it makes to believe in “Christ’s eternal gospel,”

that the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ has been on earth since the beginning of time.

3. *Doctrinal consolation.* What difference does it make to know that God has a plan and a timetable by which all of his children will have the opportunity to either accept or reject the message of salvation in Christ? What difference does it make to know that the sweetest associations of this life—marriage and family—can continue uninterrupted beyond the veil of death? What difference does it make to know that those who were unable to be married in this life to one with like passion for the faith, will have that opportunity hereafter?

4. *Doctrinal clarification and expansion.* Just as traditional Christians have no hesitation in viewing the events and teachings of the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament, so Latter-day Saints do not hesitate to read the Bible through the lenses of the Book of Mormon, modern scripture, and the words of living apostles and prophets. Supplementation is not the same as contradiction. Insights beyond those that are taught in the Bible are available on such topics as the premortal existence of humankind (see Alma 13:1–5; Moses 4:1–4; Abraham 3:22–28); the purpose of the Fall and its link to the Atonement (see 2 Nephi 2; Moses 4–5); the breadth and scope of Christ’s infinite Atonement (see Alma 7:11–13; D&C 76:22–24; Moses 1:32–35); Christ’s ministry in the postmortal spirit world (see D&C 138); and the “many mansions” (John 14:2) or degrees of glory hereafter (see D&C 76; 131).

5. *Doctrinal confirmation.* One of the major purposes of the Book of Mormon and modern scripture is to convince people “that the records of the prophets and of the twelve apostles of the Lamb are true” (1 Nephi 13:39). In the Book of Mormon we find the following: “Therefore repent, and be baptized in the name of Jesus, and lay hold upon the gospel of Christ, which shall be set before you, not only in this record but also in the record which shall come unto the Gentiles from the Jews [the Bible]. . . . For behold, this [the Book of Mormon] is written for the intent that ye may believe that [the

Bible]” (Mormon 7:8–9). In the Doctrine and Covenants we read that the Book of Mormon has been delivered in the last days to prove to the world “that the holy scriptures are true, and that God does inspire men and call them to his holy work in this age and generation, as well as in generations of old; thereby showing that he is the same God yesterday, today, and forever” (D&C 20:11–12). In a day when people worldwide have come to doubt the historicity of biblical events, teachings, and values—especially the redemptive role of Jesus the Christ—Latter-day Saint scripture stands as a second witness to their truthfulness and reality.

6. *Doctrinal consistency.* As indicated earlier, 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 [to speak in sermons or lessons or to publish] none other things than that which the prophets and apostles [ancient and modern] 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. The pattern is established in the Book of Mormon: “And it came to pass that Alma, having authority from God, ordained priests . . . to preach unto them, and to teach them concerning the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. And he commanded them that they should teach nothing save it were the things which he had taught, and which had been spoken by the mouth of the holy prophets” (Mosiah 18:18–19).

Later the practicality of such a teaching philosophy is given: “Therefore they did assemble themselves together in different bodies, being called churches; every church having their priests and their teachers, and every priest teaching the word according as it was delivered to him by the mouth of Alma.” Now, note what follows: “And thus, *notwithstanding there being many churches they were all one*

church, yea, even the church of God; for there was nothing preached in all the churches except it were repentance and faith in God" (Mosiah 25:21–22; emphasis added).

The Apostle Paul wrote that the organization of the Church—including apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers—had been put in place “for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ; *till we all come in the unity of the faith*, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: *that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine*, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive” (Ephesians 4:12–14; emphasis added).

Conclusion

Doesn't denomination A believe they have a better insight into this or that doctrine than churches B, C, and D? Doesn't this group or movement feel strongly that their beliefs and practices more closely mirror those of the church established by Jesus in the first century? Weren't Hus and Luther and Calvin and Zwingli and Wesley convinced that their efforts to reform the mother church—to cease from the abuses of Roman Catholicism and to return to the scriptures—were inspired and heaven directed, that their reforms and teachings brought them closer to what the Master had intended from the beginning?

Our God is the God of all creation, an infinite, eternal, and omniscient being who will do all that he can to lead and direct, to bring greater light into the lives of his children, to save as many as will be saved. He is the only true God and thus the only Deity who can hear and respond to the earnest petitions of his children. He is the God of the Catholics, the Protestants, the Buddhists, the Hindus, and all those who seek to know and love and offer praise and adoration to the true and living God. I have been a Latter-day Saint all my life, but I do not in any way believe the Almighty loves Latter-day Saints

any more than he loves Anglicans, Jehovah's Witnesses, Unitarians, Jews, or Muslims. He loves us all and is pleased with any and every halting effort on our part to learn of him, serve him, and be true to the light within us.

"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."³⁰ "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."³¹

Latter-day Saints cannot jettison what they believe to be the language of the Lord to Joseph Smith in 1820 in order to allay bad feelings or court favor. We hold to the truth that God has spoken anew in our day and restored his everlasting gospel through living prophets.³² This is our distinctive position, our contribution to a world that desperately needs a belief in God, an understanding of his grand plan of salvation, the promise and hope that come from a Redeemer, and confirming evidence for the historical veracity of the Holy Bible. We can seek, as I have, to better understand what was meant and intended, but we cannot relinquish the reason we have for being. President Gordon B. Hinckley remarked: "The Lord said that this is the only true and living Church upon the face of the earth with which He is well-pleased. I didn't say that. Those are His words.

The Prophet Joseph was told that the other sects were wrong. Those are not my words. Those are the Lord's words. But *they are hard words for those of other faiths. We don't need to exploit them.* We just need to be kind and good and gracious people to others, showing by our example the great truth of that which we believe."³³

"While one portion of the human race is judging and condemning the other without mercy," Brother Joseph noted solemnly, "the Great Parent of the universe looks upon the whole of the human family with a fatherly care and paternal regard; He views them as His offspring, and without any of those contracted feelings that influence the children of men, causes 'His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.' He holds the reins of judgment in His hands; He is a wise Lawgiver, and will judge all men, not according to the narrow, contracted notions of men, but 'according to the deeds done in the body whether they be good or evil. . . . We need not doubt the wisdom and intelligence of the Great Jehovah.'"³⁴

Notes

1. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 5:499.
2. *History of the Church*, 5:517.
3. George Albert Smith, *Sharing the Gospel with Others*, comp. Preston Nibley (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1948), 12–13; emphasis added.
4. M. Russell Ballard, in Conference Report, April 2007, 78–79.
5. "The Bible: A Sealed Book," Eighth Annual Church Educational System Religious Educators' Symposium, August 1984, in *Doctrines of the Restoration*, ed. Mark L. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 280.
6. "Holy Writ: Published Anew," regional representatives seminar, April 2, 1982; in *Doctrines of the Restoration*, 237; emphasis added.
7. Ezra Taft Benson, in Conference Report, April 1972, 49, citing Orson F. Whitney, in Conference Report, April 1928, 59; emphasis added.
8. B. H. Roberts, in Conference Report, April 1906, 14–15; emphasis added.
9. Neal A. Maxwell, *Things as They Really Are* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 45.
10. Maxwell, *Things as They Really Are*, 46; emphasis in original.
11. See, for example, Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002); Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*

- (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002); John G. Stackhouse Jr., *Evangelical Landscapes: Facing Critical Issues of the Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002); Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001); Bruce Wilkinson, *A Life God Rewards* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2002); Joe L. Wall, *Going for the Gold: Reward and Loss at the Judgment of Believers* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991).
12. C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections* (London: Fount/HarperCollins, 1981), 100.
 13. Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 24.
 14. *Webster's 1828 American Dictionary of the English Language*, "creed."
 15. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), "creed."
 16. Milton V. Backman Jr., *Christian Churches in America: Origins and Beliefs*, rev. ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983), 159.
 17. Bruce R. McConkie, "The Lord God of Joseph Smith," discourse delivered January 4, 1972, in *Speeches of the Year* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1972), 4; emphasis added.
 18. Philip Gulley and James Mulholland, *If God Is Love: Rediscovering Grace in an Ungracious World* (San Francisco: Harper, 2004), 56, 61; emphasis added.
 19. *History of the Church*, 6:57. One can gain a deeper insight into the Prophet's frustration and pain concerning the negative impact of religious creeds in his letter to the Saints from Liberty Jail (see D&C 123:7).
 20. *History of The Church*, 4:536; emphasis added. See also similar accounts of the First Vision published by Orson Pratt and Orson Hyde in Milton V. Backman Jr., *Joseph Smith's First Vision: Confirming Evidences and Contemporary Accounts*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 172, 175.
 21. William Grant Bangerter, "It's a Two-Way Street," address delivered on August 4, 1985, in *1984–85 BYU Speeches of the Year* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Publications, 1985), 161.
 22. Richard L. Bushman, "A Joseph Smith for the Twenty-First Century," *BYU Studies* 40, no. 3 (2001): 167–68; see also Richard L. Bushman, *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, ed. Reid L. Leilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 274.
 23. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards & Sons, 1851–86), 16:197.
 24. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 6:170; 7:5; 11:126.
 25. Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, April 2000, 7.
 26. Boyd K. Packer, "The Light of Christ," *Ensign*, April 2005, 11; emphasis added.
 27. Dallin H. Oaks, in Conference Report, April 1995, 113.
 28. Alexander B. Morrison, *Turning from Truth: A New Look at the Great Apostasy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 2.
 29. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 13:56; emphasis added.

30. *History of the Church*, 5:498.
31. *History of the Church*, 5:499.
32. See Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, October 1985, 104, 107.
33. Gordon B. Hinckley, regional conference, North Ogden, UT, May 3, 1998, as cited in *Church News*, June 3, 2000, emphasis added; see also *Ensign*, June 2004, 3.
34. *History of the Church*, 4:595–96.