

CHAPTER ONE

# THE DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS AND MODERN REVELATION

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My dear brothers and sisters, I am humbled to be participating with so many distinguished scholars as they address various dimensions of the Doctrine and Covenants. My feelings are fueled in part by the fact that I have never been quite comfortable being considered a scholar. I should like to enlarge upon a theme today from the Doctrine and Covenants: “You shall declare the things which have been revealed to my servant, Joseph Smith, Jun.” (D&C 31:4). To that I would add “and his successors in interest.”

The dean of the law school that I attended constantly impressed upon us that his primary mission was not to teach us the law, for the law would change; rather, his primary mission was to teach us to think straight, based upon sound principles.

Comparing that to our task today, we find that the body of modern scripture has changed only in the sense that it is not closed and static but being constantly added to. My desire today is to give some orientation, keeping one’s thinking straight regarding the process and importance of modern revelation as well as its content.

In an attempt to provide a background to this orientation with respect to the Doctrine and Covenants, I think it well to begin with the statement of the Prophet Joseph Smith, “I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and

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the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book."<sup>1</sup> This statement takes nothing away from the other scriptures. The Book of Mormon is a key to understanding the Bible. We also know that the Doctrine and Covenants stands in a class by itself.

Perhaps beyond that statement of Joseph concerning the Book of Mormon as the keystone of our religion, I do not feel comfortable in going further in classifying our standard works in terms of their importance. Each is unique. Each is the word of God. Each is special. Each is vital for understanding the principles of the gospel. Each is essential to our salvation. Since revelations continue to come to this divine institution all of the time, I would suggest that some priority should be given to the declarations of the modern prophets as against those received many, many centuries ago and that were intended for a different people at a different time. For instance, I feel that the counsel of our current prophet should receive far greater attention than the pronouncements of Ezekiel.

Of all the scripture, however, the Doctrine and Covenants is unique for many reasons. It is unique because, unlike the book of Revelation, it is not closed. The Lord has made contemporaneous declarations to the generations of our great-grandparents, our grandparents, and our parents, and to us and our children. Also for those of us who read English, it has gone through no language translations. It is a first impression from the Lord in English. All other scripture is, of course, pretty much from a translation of a language now archaic.

In an effort to try to understand the nature of how revelation comes, it is essential to understand that the right and function of inspiration comes through keys. Perhaps it would be worthwhile to make some personal observations with respect to the most recent revelation added to the Doctrine and Covenants, known as Official Declaration 2. Some of us are still living who had a glorious worm's eye view at close range of this great revelation. Perhaps it would be worthwhile for me to comment on some of the background. Declaration Number Two, of course, refers to the granting of the priesthood to all worthy male members of the Church. This is significant for many reasons, including the fact that with the coming of this revelation the whole world was literally opened up for the spreading of the work of God in all the world. Keys, blessings, and

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endowments, including those of the ancient patriarchs, now became possible for everyone. Of this President Spencer Kimball said:

“As you know, on the ninth of June a policy was changed that affects great numbers of people throughout the world. Millions and millions of people will be affected by the revelation which came. I remember very vividly that day after day I walked to the temple and ascended to the fourth floor where we have our solemn assemblies and where we have our meetings of the Twelve and the First Presidency. After everybody had gone out of the temple, I knelt and prayed. I prayed with much fervency. I knew that something was before us that was extremely important to many of the children of God. I knew that we could receive the revelations of the Lord only by being worthy and ready for them and ready to accept them and put them into place. Day after day I went alone and with great solemnity and seriousness in the upper rooms of the temple, and there I offered my soul and offered my efforts to go forward with the program. I wanted to do what He wanted. I talked about it to Him and said: ‘Lord, I want only what is right. We are not making any plans to be spectacularly moving. We want only the thing that thou dost want, and we want it when you want it and not until.’

“We met with the Council of the Twelve Apostles, time after time, in the holy room where there is a picture of the Savior in many different moods and also pictures of all the Presidents of the church. Finally we had the feeling and the impression from the Lord, who made it very clear to us, that this was the thing to do to make the gospel universal to all worthy people.”<sup>2</sup>

Of this experience, Elder Bruce R. McConkie states: “It was on a glorious June day in 1978. All of us were together in an upper room in the Salt Lake Temple. We were engaged in fervent prayer, pleading with the Lord to manifest his mind and will concerning those who are entitled to receive his holy priesthood. President Kimball himself was mouth, offering the desires of his heart and of our hearts to that God whose servants we are.” Previously in the same meeting, President Kimball had discussed the possible conferral of the priesthood upon all races. Elder McConkie continues: “The President restated the problem involved, reminded us of our prior discussions, and said he had spent many days alone in this upper room pleading with the Lord for an answer to our prayers. He said that if the answer

was to continue our present course of denying the priesthood to the seed of Cain, as the Lord had theretofore directed, he was prepared to defend that decision to the death. But, he said, if the long-sought day had come in which the curse of the past was to be removed, he thought we might prevail upon the Lord to so indicate. He expressed the hope that we might receive a clear answer one way or the other so the matter might be laid to rest.”

Elder McConkie continues: “It was during this prayer that the revelation came. The Spirit of the Lord rested mightily upon us all; we felt something akin to what happened on the Day of Pentecost and at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple. From the midst of eternity, the voice of God, conveyed by the power of the Spirit, spoke to his prophet. The message was that the time had now come to offer the fulness of the everlasting gospel, including celestial marriage, and the priesthood, and the blessings of the temple, to all men, without reference to race or color, solely on the basis of personal worthiness. And we all heard the same voice, received the same message, and became personal witnesses that the word received was the mind and will and the voice of the Lord. President Kimball’s prayer was answered and our prayers were answered. He heard the voice and we heard the same voice. All doubt and uncertainty fled. He knew the answer and we knew the answer. And we are all living witnesses of the truthfulness of the word so graciously sent from heaven.”<sup>3</sup>

A week following the meeting referred to by Elder McConkie, all of the General Authorities were summoned to the upper room of the temple for a special meeting. President Kimball announced the revelation, which was received by all of the Brethren with great joy. On the way over to the meeting, I was walking with one of my fellow Presidents of the First Quorum of the Seventy (at that time I was not a member of the Twelve). My beloved associate asked me if I thought the meeting pertained to a particular current problem, and I indicated that I thought not, without making any further explanation. In my heart, however, I had the hope that such a revelation as did come might be announced. No one had indicated that such might be forthcoming; my feelings came only from the broodings of the Spirit.

President Kimball’s own words describe this best of all: “We had the glorious experience of having the Lord indicate clearly that the

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time had come when all worthy men and women everywhere can be fellow heirs and partakers of the full blessings of the gospel. I want you to know, as a special witness of the Savior, how close I have felt to him and to our Heavenly Father as I have made numerous visits to the upper rooms in the temple, going on some days several times by myself. The Lord made it very clear to me what was to be done. We do not expect the people of the world to understand such things, for they will always be quick to assign their own reasons or to discount the divine process of revelation.”<sup>4</sup>

President Kimball further said of the process of revelation:

“For many it seems difficult to accept as revelation those numerous messages . . . which come to prophets as deep, unassailable impressions settling down on the prophet’s mind and heart as dew from heaven or as the dawn displaces the darkness of night. Many men seem to have no ear for spiritual messages nor comprehension of them when they come in common dress. . . . Expecting the spectacular, one may not be fully alerted to the constant flow of revealed communication.

“When in a Thursday temple meeting, after prayer and fasting, important decisions are made, new missions and new stakes are created, new patterns and policies initiated, the news is taken for granted and possibly thought of as mere human calculations. But to those who sit in the intimate circles and hear the prayers of the prophet and the testimony of the man of God; to those who see the astuteness of his deliberations and the sagacity of his decisions and pronouncements, to them he is verily a prophet. To hear him conclude important new developments with such solemn expressions as ‘the Lord is pleased’; ‘that move is right’; ‘our Heavenly Father has spoken,’ is to know positively.”<sup>5</sup>

There is so much continuous, ongoing revelation that comes to this people that the extent of it cannot be fully appreciated. It does not ever, however, become commonplace. As one who is involved in the calling of stake presidents, patriarchs, and other Church officers, from my own experience, I think perhaps Enos said it well: “And while I was thus struggling in the spirit, behold, the voice of the Lord came into my mind” (Enos 1:10).

The process explained by President Kimball and others who were present may be something like other revelations contained in the

Doctrine and Covenants, which may have involved deep impressions. President Kimball quoted a paragraph by Parley P. Pratt that showed how those revelations came to the Prophet Joseph Smith: "Each sentence was uttered slowly and very distinctly and with a pause between each, sufficiently long for it to be recorded by an ordinary writer in long hand. This was the manner in which all his written revelations were dictated and written. There was never any hesitation, reviewing or reading back, in order to keep the run of the subject; neither did any of these communications undergo revisions, interlinings or corrections. As he dictated them, so they stood, so far as I have witnessed; and I was present to witness the dictation of several communications of several pages each."<sup>6</sup>

Of the majesty and grandeur of the Doctrine and Covenants in general, President Joseph F. Smith said, "I say to my brethren that the book of Doctrine and Covenants contains some of the most glorious principles ever revealed to the world, some that have been revealed in greater fulness than they were ever revealed before to the world; and this, in fulfilment of the promise of the ancient prophets that in the latter times the Lord would reveal things to the world that had been kept hidden from the foundation thereof; and the Lord has revealed them through the Prophet Joseph Smith."<sup>7</sup>

As to the larger importance of these divine declarations, let us keep our thinking straight. After they are received, the Lord expects something to change in our lives.

President Heber J. Grant felt, however, that the marvelous utterances were of little value unless they became a part of our practical religion. Said he: "The Doctrine and Covenants is full of splendid things with which we ought to be familiar. But you can read this book through and through, and learn it off by heart, and it won't do you a particle of good unless you put into practice the teachings. To read a book through without carrying out any of the things that are taught in the book is of no value. It is the things that we read and learn and then put into practice that count."<sup>8</sup>

President Wilford Woodruff had a great testimony of the Doctrine and Covenants: "I consider that the Doctrine and Covenants, our Testament, contains a code of the most solemn, the most Godlike proclamations ever made to the human family."<sup>9</sup>

There is a great responsibility resting upon the individual student

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of the scriptures to live so as to qualify himself to have the spiritual maturity to have some understanding of the pronouncements of God and then the strength to make something happen. On this subject, Brigham Young stated: "It is your privilege and duty to live so as to be able to understand the things of God. There are the Old and New Testaments, the Book of Mormon, and the book of Doctrine and Covenants, which Joseph has given us, and they are of great worth to a person wandering in darkness. They are like a lighthouse in the ocean, or a finger-post which points out the road we should travel. Where do they points? To the Fountain of light."<sup>10</sup>

In conclusion, I should like to share one or two of the profound concepts in the Doctrine and Covenants that have impressed themselves upon my mind. One of the greatest doctrines ever pronounced is the concept of universal salvation. Because of the Atonement, all mankind will rise from the dead. The Doctrine and Covenants explains the doctrine of universal salvation clearly:

"That as many as would believe and be baptized in his holy name, and endure in faith to the end, should be saved—

"Not only those who believed after he came in the meridian of time, in the flesh, but all those from the beginning, even as many as were before he came, who believed in the words of the holy prophets, who spake as they were inspired by the gift of the Holy Ghost, who truly testified of him in all things, should have eternal life, 'As well as those who should come after, who should believe in the gifts and callings of God by the Holy Ghost, which beareth record of the Father and of the Son'" (D&C 20:25–27).

This concept is one of fairness; a companion doctrine to it is the great vicarious labor in our temple for those who are dead, whereby it may be brought into being uniformly. Temple work is required for implementing the doctrine of universal salvation. The instruction given through Thomas B. Marsh is profoundly enlightening in terms of our responsibility to receive and teach the word of God:

"Let thy heart be of good cheer before my face; and thou shalt bear record of my name, not only unto the Gentiles, but also unto the Jews; and thou shalt send forth my word unto the ends of the earth.

"Contend thou, therefore, morning by morning; and day after day

let thy warning voice go forth; and when the night cometh let not the inhabitants of the earth slumber, because of thy speech. . . .

Thy voice shall be a rebuke unto the transgressor; and at thy rebuke let the tongue of the slanderer cease its perverseness. . . .

Now, I say unto you, and what I say unto you, I say unto all the Twelve: Arise and gird up your loins, take up your cross, follow me, and feed my sheep" (D&C 112:4–5, 9, 14).

A chilling warning comes to us through section 87, wherein the Civil War between the Southern and Northern States was foretold. Verse 6 tells of the bloodshed, famine, plague, earthquake, and wrath to come under the chastening hand of Almighty God. That verse concludes that the calamities would continue "until the consumption decreed hath made a full end of all nations" (D&C 87:6).

I rejoice that in our time the heavens have been opened and the ears of our great prophet have been opened to receive further light and knowledge. I am satisfied that it is not much dissimilar from the process that the Prophet Joseph enjoyed in bringing forth the majority of the Doctrine and Covenants. Of course, you know of the other revelations that have been added to it in our recent lifetime, testifying to the fact that the heavens are opened and the scriptures are not closed. I am grateful and add my testimony to the correctness of the doctrine and the inspiration that came in Official Declaration 2, of which, as I indicated earlier, I personally had worm's eye view and, along with my brethren, some involvement. I am satisfied that Official Declaration 2 is as great a pronouncement as we have otherwise in the Book of Mormon, and it came in our time; now, the gospel can roll forth in the many countries of the world.

And so I counsel and testify "ye shall declare the things which have been received to my servant, Joseph Smith, Jun., and his successors in interest." I ask the Lord to bless this body of scholars that they will have the spiritual enlightenment and understanding to comprehend the subtle, great, and spiritual messages that are contained not only in the Doctrine and Covenants but in the other scriptures as well, and then, having received them and having come to some understanding of what the Lord had intended in them, that we then have the strength and the courage and the wisdom to implement them into our lives.

I ask the blessings of heaven to be upon each and every one of you



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and upon the great department of this marvelous university that has sponsored this symposium, Religious Education. This department is something of the eye of the storm of this great university and something of the fulcrum around which it all centers in this university for the promulgation of truth. And the center of all truth is, of course, from our Heavenly Father.

I leave you the witness of my soul that God has revealed and does constantly reveal through His servants throughout all the Church, from the levels of the Relief Society presidents, the Primary presidents, the bishops, the stake presidents, the mission presidents, and the General Authorities, a flow of constant revelation, which, if our spiritual ears are attuned, we shall be able to receive and interpret.

I personally testify of having had the Lord speak to my mind on frequent and regular occasions and declare this witness and leave you this blessing and testimony.

## NOTES

1. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed., rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 4:461.
2. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 450–51.
3. Bruce R. McConkie, “The New Revelation on Priesthood,” in *Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 126–28.
4. Kimball, *Teachings*, 452.
5. Kimball, *Teachings*, 457–58.
6. Kimball, *Teachings*, 456.
7. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 45.
8. Heber J. Grant, *Gospel Standards* (Salt Lake City: Improvement Era, 1941), 39.
9. Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 22:146.
10. Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, comp. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), 127.