

CHAPTER SIX

THE EXPLANATORY INTRODUCTION: A GUIDE TO THE DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS

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Following the title page of the Doctrine and Covenants and preceding the text of the revelations are three pages of helpful text called the Explanatory Introduction.¹ Unfortunately, many members of the Church overlook this important study aid, perhaps because section 1 of the Doctrine and Covenants is named by the Lord as His “preface.” However, serious students of the Doctrine and Covenants will find that in addition to the Lord’s preface, the Explanatory Introduction acts as an excellent guide to a thoughtful and prayerful study of the Doctrine and Covenants.

The idea of an explanatory introduction is not unique to the Doctrine and Covenants. The Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the Pearl of Great Price all offer such explanatory pages. In these books, this front material sets the necessary stage for an in-depth study of the gospel. Primarily, these introductions provide a contextual history that is necessary to an understanding of the settings and circumstances from which these books of scripture originate.

Previous editions of the Doctrine and Covenants called the explanatory pages the “preface,” such as in the earliest edition in 1835. Over the years this seeming discrepancy of two prefaces led to

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some confusion. To resolve the confusion, in the 1921 edition the preface was renamed the Explanatory Introduction.

Compared with its previous 1921 version, our current version of the Explanatory Introduction is quite different. The 1921 edition of the scriptures was under the supervision of Elder George F. Richards of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. On December 17, 1921, the First Presidency, while making an official announcement concerning the new 1921 edition, stated that the Explanatory Introduction comprised “in concise form the essential facts relating to the history of this sacred volume of Latter-day revelation.”² In other words, the content of the 1921 edition briefly told the history of the coming forth of the Doctrine and Covenants. On the other hand, the 1981 edition not only gives a brief history of the editions of the Doctrine and Covenants but also provides more information about the nature and purpose of the Doctrine and Covenants.

The 1981 edition was completed under the direction of President Spencer W. Kimball, with Elders Thomas S. Monson (acting as chair), Bruce R. McConkie, and Boyd K. Packer supervising the work of Ellis T. Rasmussen and Robert J. Matthews.³ It is noteworthy that the Explanatory Introduction was authored by General Authorities of the Church who sought the spirit of revelation as they wrote it.

Unlike the previous versions, the Explanatory Introduction of the 1981 edition offers its readers several guiding themes on which they may base their study of the Doctrine and Covenants.⁴ Of these, we have chosen to highlight and enlarge seven of the major themes. These seven are some of the most prominent and overarching themes in the Doctrine and Covenants.⁵ They include the following: the revelations were given in times of real need to real people, the events of the Restoration unfolded under the Lord’s direction, the administrative structure of the Church gradually unfolded, the doctrines of the plan of salvation were revealed, the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible was inspired by God, the westward movement of the Church was guided by God, and these revelations bring people to Jesus Christ. (Each of the following themes begins by quoting directly from the Explanatory Introduction. These words are italicized.)

REVELATIONS GIVEN IN TIMES OF REAL NEED TO REAL PEOPLE

These sacred revelations were received in answer to prayer, in times of need, and came out of real-life situations involving real people. The prophet and his associates sought for divine guidance, and these revelations certify that they received it.

A number of the revelations are directed to specific individuals. There are 136 individuals mentioned by name in the Doctrine and Covenants.⁶ For this reason it would be a mistake to overlook these revelations. Though these revelations and instructions are to specific individuals, they hold great importance in that many of them are expressions of gospel principles from which all can benefit. For example, personal instructions to Joseph Smith and Newel K. Whitney (see D&C 93:47–50) reminds us that anyone who has not kept the commandments must stand rebuked before the Lord. All have need to be chastened, set their families in order, and see that they are more diligent and concerned to pray always, or they may “be removed out of their place” (D&C 93:48). As the Lord said, “What I say unto one I say unto all” (D&C 93:49). Readers should each apply the principles included in the Lord’s instructions to themselves.

The fact that so many people are referred to by name in the Doctrine and Covenants emphasizes the words of the Lord: “Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God” (D&C 18:10). This manifestation of God’s great love and concern for His children evidences that He knows and loves His children and cares what they do with the time He has given them in mortality.

From these revelations, a number of personal instructions, warnings, commands, and counsels emerge. The revelations warn against murder, theft, dishonesty, adultery, pride, and idleness—to name only a few. Also included is needed counsel on the observance of the Sabbath day, loving the Lord and one’s neighbor, treating others as equals, supporting one’s family, seeking an education, and teaching one’s children.

These revelations were given in times of real need. Often these revelations came as the answer to a question or a real-life circumstance that had arisen. As the Church gradually grew and developed, problems arose that caused the Prophet to approach the Lord for answers or solutions to the matters at hand. This pattern represents the

method the Lord uses in dealing with His children—He asks that we reach out to obtain His blessings: “Ask, and ye shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (D&C 4:7). Then, as answers come to a question or problem, the Lord often explicates an existing condition. This explains why the revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants may seem somewhat disjointed in nature. Taking the time to become familiar with the people of the Doctrine and Covenants and the history of the Church enveloping each revelation will greatly enhance one’s comprehension of this sacred book.⁷

THE UNFOLDING OF THE EVENTS OF THE RESTORATION

In the revelations one sees the restoration and unfolding of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the ushering in of the dispensation of the fulness of times.

The unfolding of the Restoration began with the visitation of the Father and the Son to the boy Joseph Smith Jr.—the First Vision in the spring of 1820. The Doctrine and Covenants refers to this event: “Wherefore, I the Lord, . . . called upon my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., and spake unto him from heaven, and gave him commandments. . . . And also those to whom these commandments were given, might have power to lay the foundation of this church, and to bring it forth out of obscurity and out of darkness, the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth” (D&C 1:17, 30).

This marvelous book also testifies of the events of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, the reestablishment of the order of the priesthood, and the organization of the kingdom of God on earth. Most of the initial revelations given to Joseph Smith focused on these events. The Lord announced in 1831 that “the keys of the kingdom of God are committed unto man on the earth” (D&C 65:2). This started with the Aaronic Priesthood on May 15, 1829 (see D&C 13), was followed shortly thereafter with the Melchizedek Priesthood (see D&C 128:20), and was later enlarged with the restored keys of the gospel of Abraham, gathering, and temple work (see D&C 110). These events had been foreseen and reported to Joseph Smith by the angel Moroni in 1823 in the earliest revelation of the Doctrine and Covenants: “Behold, I will reveal unto you the Priesthood, by the hand of Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord” (D&C 2:1). Most recently, the priesthood has been extended to all worthy males (see Official Declaration 2). This

declaration attests to the doctrine of continued revelation that is given in times of need and in real-life situations, which the Church faced at the time.

In addition to the calling of the Book of Mormon witnesses (see D&C 5, 17), the incidents involving the translation and printing of the Book of Mormon are reported (see D&C 3, 6, 8, 9, 10). Furthermore, after centuries of apostasy, the kingdom of God was organized on earth and recorded in a revelation on April 6, 1830, in Fayette, New York (see D&C 21). Indeed, the return of the Church of Jesus Christ, for the last time, is committed to the dispensation of the fulness of times. “Unto whom I have committed the keys of my kingdom, and a dispensation of the gospel for the last times; and for the fulness of times, in the which I will gather together in one all things, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth” (D&C 27:13).

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE OF THE CHURCH

Likewise the gradual unfolding of the administrative structure of the Church is shown with the calling of bishops, the First Presidency, the Council of the Twelve, and the Seventy, and the establishment of other presiding offices and quorums.

Holding the power of the priesthood of God, the Saints are authorized to act as the body in Christ. The Doctrine and Covenants instructs this body how to act in the administrative affairs in the kingdom. No other book of scripture lays out the administrative structure of the Church as does the Doctrine and Covenants. The revelations report the nature, offices, and ordinances of the priesthood of God. Taken together, these passages constitute the essential order of the priesthood. Chiefly at the Amhurst, Ohio, conference, Joseph Smith was sustained and ordained the president of the High Priesthood. Later the Lord stated, “Verily I say unto you, I now give unto you the officers belonging to my Priesthood, that ye may hold the keys thereof, even the Priesthood which is after the order of Melchizedek, which is after the order of mine Only Begotten Son. . . . I give unto you my servant Joseph to be a presiding elder over all my church, to be a translator, a revelator, a seer, and prophet” (D&C 124:123, 125).

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in which priesthood offices should discharge their duties and how they would perform the ordinances of the priesthood. In March of 1839, an unparalleled revelation (see D&C 121) addressed the power and rights of the use of any priesthood office or authority. Other revelations contain instructions on the blessings of children (see D&C 20:70), healing the sick (see D&C 42:43–52), baptism (see D&C 20:37, 71–74; 22:1–4; 128:12–14) the sacrament (see D&C 20:68–79), endowment (see D&C 105), baptism for the dead (see D&C 127; 128), the dedicatory prayer for the Kirtland Temple (see D&C 109), and the reception of members into the School of the Prophets (see D&C 88:127–141).

In addition, the revelations give essential principles of Church administration such as the necessity of membership records (see D&C 20:64), the keeping of a history of the Church (see D&C 47:1–4), and the conduct of meetings (see D&C 41:1–8, 12).

In essence, these revelations constitute the first handbook of instructions for Church leaders. These inspired instructions are prescriptive, concise, perceptive, demanding, and rewarding. When seen with all they embrace, they inspire nothing less than the highest degree of devotion, sacrifice, and obedience.

THE DOCTRINES OF THE PLAN OF SALVATION REVEALED

In the revelations the doctrines of the gospel are set forth with explanations about such fundamental matters as the nature of the Godhead, the origin of man, the reality of Satan, the purpose of mortality, the necessity for obedience, the need for repentance, the workings of the Holy Spirit, the ordinances and performances that pertain to salvation, the destiny of the earth, the future conditions of man after the resurrection and the judgment, the eternity of the marriage relationship, and the eternal nature of the family.

Most do not approach the reading of the Doctrine and Covenants as they might a novel—reading it from cover to cover in several sittings. However, if this approach were taken with the Doctrine and Covenants, a significant outcome would be realized—that is, how well the book teaches the doctrines of salvation. Actually, the doctrinal content of the Doctrine and Covenants is encyclopedic in nature. This is seen in part in the 416-page index to the Doctrine and Covenants and the Book of Mormon. In fact, every doctrine taught

by the Church is found or referred to in the Doctrine and Covenants. Specifically, the Doctrine and Covenants is often the sole source of clear knowledge about some of the doctrines of the gospel which are not found in other books of scripture (see D&C 27:7; 84:27–28; 35:4; 77:14). From that point of view, the book naturally becomes the most important doctrinal book we have in the Church. No other book of scripture can lay the same claim to having a full survey of all the doctrines of the Church. This is the dispensation of the fulness of times, and the fulness of the gospel has been revealed in the Doctrine and Covenants. Since we know that our Father in Heaven makes covenants with His children in order to bring about their salvation and eternal life, it should not be surprising that the Doctrine and Covenants contains a great deal of revelation about God's eternal plan of salvation. The prevalence of these revelations may be seen even in a brief survey of the Doctrine and Covenants.

For example, if you wanted to learn about the nature of God, the Doctrine and Covenants teaches about His personality (see D&C 130:1–3, 22–23; 50:10–12); the reason He is God (see D&C 132:20); His attributes (see D&C 20:17; 35:1; 3:10; 39:16; 6:20; 84:102; 87:6); His power (see D&C 61:1; 100:1; 88:13, 47; 121:36); His home (see D&C 88:13; 130:7, 8); His messengers (see D&C 129:1, 4; 130:4–7; 43:25); His omniscience (see D&C 130:7–11; 88:5–13); and His fatherhood (see D&C 27:14; 76:13; 76:24; 88:41). Lest we forget, the voice of the Doctrine and Covenants is that of Jesus Christ. Appropriately so, who could teach us better about God than His Son, a member of the Godhead?

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE INSPIRED TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE

Some later sections reflect the work of the Prophet Joseph Smith in making an inspired translation of the Bible, during which many of the great doctrinal sections were received (see, for example, Sections 37, 45, 73, 76, 77, 86, 91, and 132, each of which has some direct relationship to the Bible translation).

The Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible had a substantial influence on the content of the Doctrine and Covenants, particularly on these revelations received during the years 1830–33. Joseph's translation of the Bible was a primary source for many of the doctrinal statements in the Doctrine and Covenants. For example, Doctrine

and Covenants 29 was received by the Prophet Joseph Smith in September 1830 at Fayette, New York. The immediate circumstances that prompted this revelation are not fully known, yet its contents are highly doctrinal. Verses 31–42 clarify the spiritual and temporal aspects of the Creation as well as the cause and consequences of the Fall of Adam. It is instructive to know that as Genesis 1–3 were being translated in the Bible by Joseph Smith, Doctrine and Covenants 29 was received at the same time in correlation with his study of the Creation and the Fall. Other revelations to consider include parts of sections 6, 8, 9, 29, 35, 41, 42, 74, 93, 104, and 124.

The Doctrine and Covenants also contains regulatory and instructional information about the Joseph Smith Translation. The revelations give direction on when to begin (see D&C 9:1–2), when to pause (see D&C 37:1–4), when to recommence translation (see D&C 41:7), who the scribe was to be (see D&C 35:20; 47:1), and the time in which the parts of the Bible should be translated (see D&C 45:60–62). These came with the exhortation to move more rapidly (see D&C 73:3–4; 93:53) and to make plans for publication (see D&C 94:10; 124:89). These instructive items are found in various revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants. Knowing that they are there will enhance and deepen one's study of the context of the Joseph Smith Translation.⁸

THE WESTWARD MOVEMENT OF THE CHURCH

The westward movement of the Church from New York and Pennsylvania, to Ohio, to Missouri, to Illinois, and finally to the Great Basin of western America, and the mighty struggles of the saints in attempting to build Zion on the earth in modern times, are also shown forth in these revelations.

The westward movement of the Church from New York to the Rocky Mountains was centered in the doctrine of gathering. As few as five months after the Church was organized in 1830 the Lord announced, "Wherefore the decree hath gone forth from the Father that they shall be gathered in unto one place upon the face of this land, to prepare their hearts and be prepared in all things against the day when tribulation and desolation are sent forth upon the wicked" (D&C 29:8).

The purpose for gathering is also a scriptural injunction:

“Wherefore, for this cause I gave unto you the commandment that ye should go to the Ohio; and there I will give unto you my law; and there you shall be endowed with power from on high” (D&C 38:32).

The gathering, as witnessed by the westward movement of the Church, was operational from 1830 to the 1890s from New York to Kirtland, Ohio, to Missouri, followed by Illinois, to Council Bluffs, Iowa (as a stopping place on the way to the Rocky Mountains in the Great Basin). The westward movement is an outward manifestation of a covenant-making people who adhere to God’s commands.

THE VOICE OF JESUS

In the revelations one hears the tender but firm voice of the Lord Jesus Christ, speaking anew in the dispensation of the fulness of times; and the work that is initiated herein is preparatory to his second coming, in fulfillment of and in concert with the words of all the holy prophets since the world began.

With few exceptions, the speaker in the revelations is the resurrected Jesus Christ. On occasion, Christ will quote or speak as if He is the Father, yet He does not give attribution to God the Father. The language of the revelations, with the exception of a few words by heavenly angels (see D&C 2; 7; 13), is the language of Joseph Smith. As the inspired ideas and thoughts came into his mind, he composed the revelatory language from his own linguistic background (see D&C 1:24).

Unique to the Doctrine and Covenants are the many passages in which Christ speaks autobiographically. These passages run throughout the entirety of the book. An illustration is found in Doctrine and Covenants 38:1–4. Here Christ speaks about His nature, reminding us that He is the creator of the earth and informing us that it was He who took Enoch unto Himself:

“Thus saith the Lord your God, even Jesus Christ, the Great I Am, Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the same which looked upon the wide expanse of eternity, and all the seraphic hosts of heaven, before the world was made;

“The same which knoweth all things, for all things are present before mine eyes;

“I am the same which spake, and the world was made, and all things came by me.

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“I am the same which have taken the Zion of Enoch into mine own bosom; and verily, I say, even as many as have believed in my name, for I am Christ, and in mine own name, by the virtue of the blood which I have spilt, have I pleaded before the Father for them.”

Taking collective note of these autobiographical passages of scripture from the Lord provides an amazingly rich and full picture of the nature, role, mission, and life of our Savior.

One important aspect of Christ’s voice in this sacred book is that of warning—one which indicates a soon-to-come day of judgment and recompense. This significant theme running through the Doctrine and Covenants⁹ warns all the world (see D&C 43:17–29, 34–35): the wicked (see D&C 63:1–6), the righteous (see D&C 88:62–68), and kings and paupers alike (see D&C 124:3–11). None will escape this day of God’s judgment (see D&C 29:3–21). God expects us to take these revelations seriously. No one who reads this book of scripture can say they have not been warned. The Lord Himself warns, “And all they who receive the oracles of God, let them beware how they hold them lest they are accounted as a light thing, and are brought under condemnation thereby, and stumble and fall when the storms descend, and the winds blow, and the rains descend, and beat upon their house” (D&C 90:5).

This warning comes as an act of love prompted by the balanced necessity of mercy and justice. Moreover, repeatedly in these revelations the Savior extends a tender hand of mercy (D&C 76:5–10), inviting repentance (D&C 19:4–5) and giving peace. In the end, those who heed this divine voice of warning will reap the promised blessings (D&C 56:14–20).

SUMMARY

It may seem that the Doctrine and Covenants is a challenging book of scripture to comprehend because it reads more like a compilation of random historical accounts and doctrinal dissertations. Unlike the Book of Mormon, there is no storyline other than the history of the Church—no author pulling it all together. Nor does it read like the unforgettable parables in the New Testament. Reading the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants is more like reading the letters of Paul; each one has its own topic containing its own insights and background. Hence, it is all the more important that the

thoughtful, prayerful student utilize the inspired study aids of the Doctrine and Covenants—specifically the Explanatory Introduction.

The Explanatory Introduction gives direction to a thoughtful study of the Doctrine and Covenants. It guides the reader to become more familiar with the 136 people mentioned and the situations that brought about each revelation. The reader should take note of the revelations concerning the unfolding of the Restoration and of the administrative structure of the Church, learn about the contributions of the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, follow the westward movement of the Church through the revelations, and listen to the Lord's voice and adhere to the counsel, direction, and warnings of Jesus Christ. Following this course of study as outlined in the Explanatory Introduction will help the reader see what makes this book, as it states, "*of great value to the human family and of more worth than the riches of the whole earth.*"

NOTES

1. The Explanatory Introduction referenced here is found in the 1981 version of the Doctrine and Covenants published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
2. Robert J. Woodford, "The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants" (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, April 1974), 1:76.
3. Bruce T. Harper, "The Church Publishes a New Triple Combination," *Ensign*, October 1981, 9.
4. For other examples of the Doctrine and Covenants themes see John A. Widtsoe, *The Message of the Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969). For another arrangement of main themes, see the chart compiled by Minnie E. Anderson, "Classified Contents of the Doctrine and Covenants," *Instructor*, July 1968, facing page 292.
5. It should be noted that Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson discuss the Explanatory Introduction in terms of four primary purposes in *Studies in Scripture, Vol. 1: The Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 25. While their four points seek to constitute what they feel are the purposes of the Explanatory Introduction as a whole, we have taken a different approach in which we look at the themes of the Doctrine and Covenants as they are introduced in the Explanatory Introduction.
6. Susan Easton Black, *Who's Who in the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997). This book gives a two- or three-page

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biographical summary of all 136 individuals in the Doctrine and Covenants.

7. A readily available source of Church history is the Church Educational System student manual, *Church History in the Fulness of Times* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001).
8. Robert J. Matthews, "The Joseph Smith Translation: A Primary Source for the Doctrine and Covenants," in *Hearken, O Ye People: Discourses of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Sandy, Utah: Randall Book, 1984), 90.
9. Christ's voice of warning in the Doctrine and Covenants was influential in the writing of the popular missionary tract titled *A Voice of Warning* by Parley P. Pratt (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1950).