

The Doctrine of Christ

By Elder D. Todd Christofferson
Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles



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We have seen of late a growing public interest in the beliefs of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This is something we welcome because, after all, our fundamental commission is to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ, His doctrine, in all the world (see Matthew 28:19–20; D&C 112:28). But we must admit there has been and still persists some confusion about our doctrine and how it is established. That is the subject I wish to address today.

The Savior taught His doctrine in the meridian of time, and His Apostles struggled mightily to preserve it against a barrage of false tradition and philosophy. New Testament Epistles cite numerous incidents demonstrating that serious and widespread apostasy was already under way during the Apostles' ministry.¹

The centuries that followed were illuminated by occasional rays of gospel light until, in the 19th century, a brilliant dawn of Restoration broke upon the world, and the gospel of Christ, full and complete, was once again upon the earth. This glorious day began when, in “a pillar of light ... above the brightness of the sun” (Joseph Smith—History 1:16), God the Father and His Beloved Son, Jesus Christ, visited young Joseph Smith and initiated what would become a virtual flood of revelation linked with divine power and authority.

In these revelations we find what might be termed the core doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ reestablished upon the earth. Jesus Himself defined that doctrine in these words recorded in the Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ:

“This is my doctrine, and it is the doctrine which the Father hath given unto me; and I bear record of the Father, and the Father beareth record of me, and the Holy Ghost beareth record of the Father and me; and I bear record that the Father commandeth all men, everywhere, to repent and believe in me.

“And whoso believeth in me, and is baptized, the same shall be saved; and they are they who shall inherit the kingdom of God.

“And whoso believeth not in me, and is not baptized, shall be damned.

“... And whoso believeth in me believeth in the Father also; and unto him will the Father bear record of me, for he will visit him with fire and with the Holy Ghost. ...

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, that this is my doctrine, and whoso buildeth upon this buildeth upon my rock, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against them” (3 Nephi 11:32–35, 39).

This is our message, the rock upon which we build, the foundation of everything else in the Church. Like all that comes from God, this doctrine is pure, it is clear, it is easy to understand—even for a child. With glad hearts, we invite all to receive it.

In The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “we believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God” (Articles of Faith 1:9). This is to say that while there is much we do not yet know, the truths and doctrine we have received have come and will continue to come by divine revelation. In some faith traditions, theologians claim equal teaching authority with the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and doctrinal matters may become a contest of opinions between them. Some rely on the ecumenical councils of the Middle Ages and their creeds. Others place primary emphasis on the reasoning of post-apostolic theologians or on biblical hermeneutics and exegesis. We value scholarship that enhances understanding, but in the Church today, just as anciently, establishing the doctrine of Christ or correcting doctrinal deviations is a matter of divine revelation to those the Lord endows with apostolic authority.²

In 1954, President J. Reuben Clark Jr., then a counselor in the First Presidency, explained how doctrine is promulgated in the Church and the preeminent role of the President of the Church. Speaking of members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, he stated: “[We] should [bear] in mind that some of the General Authorities have had assigned to them a special calling; they possess a special gift; they are sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators, which gives them a special spiritual endowment in connection with their teaching of the people. They have the right, the power, and authority to declare the mind and will of God to his people, subject to the over-all power and authority of the President of the Church. Others of the General Authorities are not given this special spiritual endowment and authority covering their teaching; they have a resulting limitation, and the resulting limitation upon their power and authority in teaching applies to every other officer and member of the Church, for none of them is spiritually endowed as a prophet, seer, and revelator. Furthermore, as just indicated, the President of the Church has a further and special spiritual endowment in this respect, for he is the Prophet, Seer, and Revelator for the whole Church.”³

How does the Savior reveal His will and doctrine to prophets, seers, and revelators? He may act by messenger or in His own person. He may speak by His own voice or by the voice of the Holy Spirit—a communication of Spirit to spirit that may be expressed in words or in feelings that convey understanding beyond words (see 1 Nephi 17:45; D&C 9:8). He may direct Himself to His servants individually or acting in council (see 3 Nephi 27:1–8).

I cite two illustrations from the New Testament. The first was a revelation directed to the head of the Church. Early in the book of Acts, we find the Apostles of Christ declaring the gospel message only to Jews, following the pattern of Jesus’s ministry (see Matthew 15:24), but now, in the Lord’s timetable, the time had come for a change. In Joppa, Peter had a dream in which he saw a variety of animals lowered to earth from heaven in “a great sheet knit at the four corners” (Acts 10:11) and was commanded to “kill, and eat” (Acts 10:13). Peter was reluctant since at least some of the animals were “unclean” under the law of Moses, and Peter had never violated the commandment against eating such. Nevertheless, the voice said to Peter in his dream, “What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common” (Acts 10:15).

The meaning of this dream became clear when soon afterward, several men sent from the Roman centurion Cornelius arrived at Peter's lodging with a request that he come teach their master. Cornelius had gathered a sizable group of relatives and friends, and finding them expectantly waiting to receive his message, Peter said:

"God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean. ...

"... Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons:

"But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him" (Acts 10:28, 34–35; see also verses 17–24).

"While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word.

"And they [who accompanied Peter] were astonished ... because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost.

"... Then answered Peter,

"Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?" (Acts 10:44–47).

By this experience and revelation to Peter, the Lord modified the practice of the Church and revealed a more complete doctrinal understanding to His disciples. And so the preaching of the gospel expanded to encompass all mankind.

Later in the book of Acts, we find another somewhat related illustration, this time showing how revelation on matters of doctrine may come in a council setting. A controversy arose about whether circumcision required under the law of Moses should carry over as a commandment in the gospel and Church of Christ (see Acts 15:1, 5). "And the apostles and elders came together for to consider ... this matter" (Acts 15:6). Our record of this council is certainly incomplete, but we are told that after "much disputing" (Acts 15:7), Peter, the senior Apostle, rose up and declared what the Holy Spirit had confirmed to him. He reminded the council that when the gospel began to be preached to the uncircumcised Gentiles in the house of Cornelius, they received the Holy Ghost just as had the circumcised Jewish converts. God, he said, "put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

"Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

"But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they" (Acts 15:9–11; see also verse 8).

After Paul, Barnabas, and perhaps others spoke in support of Peter's declaration, James moved that the decision be implemented by letter to the Church, and the council was united "with one accord" (Acts 15:25; see also verses 12–23). In the letter announcing their decision, the Apostles said, "It seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us" (Acts 15:28), or in other words, this decision came by divine revelation through the Holy Spirit.

These same patterns are followed today in the restored Church of Jesus Christ. The President of the Church may announce or interpret doctrines based on revelation to him (see, for example, D&C 138). Doctrinal exposition

may also come through the combined council of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (see, for example, Official Declaration 2). Council deliberations will often include a weighing of canonized scriptures, the teachings of Church leaders, and past practice. But in the end, just as in the New Testament Church, the objective is not simply consensus among council members but revelation from God. It is a process involving both reason and faith for obtaining the mind and will of the Lord.⁴

At the same time it should be remembered that not every statement made by a Church leader, past or present, necessarily constitutes doctrine. It is commonly understood in the Church that a statement made by one leader on a single occasion often represents a personal, though well-considered, opinion, not meant to be official or binding for the whole Church. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that “a prophet [is] a prophet only when he [is] acting as such.”⁵ President Clark, quoted earlier, observed:

“To this point runs a simple story my father told me as a boy, I do not know on what authority, but it illustrates the point. His story was that during the excitement incident to the coming of [Johnston’s] Army, Brother Brigham preached to the people in a morning meeting a sermon vibrant with defiance to the approaching army, and declaring an intention to oppose and drive them back. In the afternoon meeting he arose and said that Brigham Young had been talking in the morning, but the Lord was going to talk now. He then delivered an address, the tempo of which was the opposite from the morning talk. ...

“... The Church will know by the testimony of the Holy Ghost in the body of the members, whether the brethren in voicing their views are ‘moved upon by the Holy Ghost’; and in due time that knowledge will be made manifest.”⁶

The Prophet Joseph Smith confirmed the Savior’s central role in our doctrine in one definitive sentence: “The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it.”⁷ Joseph Smith’s testimony of Jesus is that He lives, “for [he] saw him, even on the right hand of God; and [he] heard the voice bearing record that he is the Only Begotten of the Father” (D&C 76:23; see also verse 22). I appeal to all who hear or read this message to seek through prayer and study of the scriptures that same witness of the divine character, the Atonement, and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Accept His doctrine by repenting, being baptized, receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, and then throughout your life following the laws and covenants of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As our Easter celebration approaches, I express my own witness that Jesus of Nazareth was and is the Son of God, the very Messiah of ancient prophecy. He is the Christ, who suffered in Gethsemane, died on the cross, was buried, and who indeed rose again the third day. He is the resurrected Lord, through whom we shall all be resurrected and by whom all who will may be redeemed and exalted in His heavenly kingdom. This is our doctrine, confirming all prior testaments of Jesus Christ and stated anew for our own time. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See Neal A. Maxwell, “From the Beginning,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1993, 18–19: “James decried ‘wars and fightings among’ the Church (James 4:1). Paul lamented ‘divisions’ in the Church and how ‘grievous

wolves' would not spare 'the flock' (1 Cor. 11:18; Acts 20:29–31). He knew an apostasy was coming and wrote to the Thessalonians that Jesus' second coming would not occur 'except there come a falling away first'; further advising that 'iniquity doth already work' (2 Thes. 2:3, 7). "Near the end, Paul acknowledged how very extensive the falling away was: 'All they which are in Asia be turned away from me' (2 Tim. 1:15). ... "Widespread fornication and idolatry brought apostolic alarm (see 1 Cor. 5:9; Eph. 5:3; Jude 1:7). John and Paul both bemoaned the rise of false Apostles (see 2 Cor. 11:13; Rev. 2:2). The Church was clearly under siege. Some not only fell away but then openly opposed. In one circumstance, Paul stood alone and lamented that 'all men forsook me' (2 Tim. 4:16). He also decried those who 'subvert[ed] whole houses' (Titus 1:11). "Some local leaders rebelled, as when one, who loved his preeminence, refused to receive the brethren (see 3 Jn. 1:9–10). "No wonder President Brigham Young observed: 'It is said the Priesthood was taken from the Church, but it is not so, the Church went from the Priesthood' (in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:69). "In the course of time, as Elder Maxwell expressed it, "reason, the Greek philosophical tradition, dominated, then supplanted, reliance on revelation, an outcome probably hastened by well-intentioned Christians wishing to bring their beliefs into the mainstream of contemporary culture. ... "Let us [too] be wary about accommodating revealed theology to conventional wisdom" (*Ensign*, Nov. 1993, 19–20).

2. Apostles and prophets such as Joseph Smith declare God's word, but in addition, we believe men and women generally and even children can learn from and be guided by divine inspiration in response to prayer and study of the scriptures. Just as in the days of the ancient Apostles, members of the Church of Jesus Christ are given the gift of the Holy Ghost, which facilitates an ongoing communication with their Heavenly Father, or, in other words, personal revelation (see Acts 2:37–38). In this way, the Church becomes a body of committed, spiritually mature individuals whose faith is not blind but seeing— informed and confirmed by the Holy Spirit. This is not to say that every member speaks for the Church or can define its doctrines but that each can receive divine guidance in dealing with the challenges and opportunities of his or her life.

3. J. Reuben Clark Jr., "When Are Church Leaders' Words Entitled to Claim of Scripture?" *Church News*, July 31, 1954, 9–10; see also Doctrine and Covenants 28:1–2, 6–7, 11–13.

4. The required preparation and qualifications for council participants are "righteousness, ... holiness, and lowliness of heart, meekness and long suffering, ... faith, and virtue, and knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness and charity;" "Because the promise is, if these things abound in them they shall not be unfruitful in the knowledge of the Lord" (Doctrine and Covenants 107:30–31).

5. Joseph Smith, in *History of the Church*, 5:265.

6. J. Reuben Clark Jr., “Church Leaders’ Words,” 10. Of the story his father told him about Brigham Young, President Clark further wrote: “I do not know if this ever happened, but I say it illustrates a principle—that even the President of the Church, himself, may not always be ‘moved upon by the Holy Ghost,’ when he addresses the people. This has happened about matters of doctrine (usually of a highly speculative character) where subsequent Presidents of the Church and the peoples themselves have felt that in declaring the doctrine, the announcer was not ‘moved upon by the Holy Ghost.’ “How shall the Church know when these adventurous expeditions of the brethren into these highly speculative principles and doctrines meet the requirements of the statutes that the announcers thereof have been ‘moved upon by the Holy Ghost’? The Church will know by the testimony of the Holy Ghost in the body of the members, whether the brethren in voicing their views are ‘moved upon by the Holy Ghost’; and in due time that knowledge will be made manifest” (“Church Leaders’ Words,” 10).

7. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 49.