Review of Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Ezra Taft Benson

During 2015 LDS members studied *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Ezra Taft Benson*. What follows is a chapter-by-chapter evangelical review.

Chapter 1: The Great Commandment: Love the Lord

The first and great commandment is to love the Lord.

I wholeheartedly agree! The key, though, is to have a relationship with the *true* "Lord" and God of the universe. Worship to a false deity is worse than no worship at all.

The great test of life is obedience to God. "We will prove them herewith," said the Lord, "to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them" (Abraham 3:25).

For good reasons, Christians don't accept the Book of Abraham as scripture.

The great task of life is to learn the will of the Lord and then do it.

What is God's will? According to John 6:29, it is to believe in the true Jesus of the Bible. ("Jesus answered, 'The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.'") First Timothy 2:3-4 adds, "This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." Only when this happens can true sanctification take place. As 1 Thessalonians 4:3 says, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality."

The great commandment of life is to love the Lord.

"Come unto Christ," exhorts Moroni in his closing testimony, "… and love God with all your might, mind and strength" (Moroni 10:32).

This reference comes straight from the gospel of Matthew (22:37) and is not unique to Moroni.

This, then, is the first and great commandment: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength" (Mark 12:30; see also Matthew 22:37; Deuteronomy 6:5; Luke 10:27; Moroni 10:32; D&C 59:5).

It is the pure love of Christ, called charity, that the Book of Mormon testifies is the greatest of all—that never faileth, that endureth forever, that all men should have, and that without which they are nothing (see Moroni 7:44–47; 2 Nephi 26:30).

"Wherefore, my beloved brethren," pleads Moroni, "pray unto the Father with all the energy of [your] heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ; that ye may become the sons of God; that when he shall appear we shall be like him" (Moroni 7:48).

If a person loves God with "all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength," he or she will want to worship the authentic version. If someone tries to pass a counterfeit bill, it will be seen and rejected. How could God delight in worshiping a false god?

To love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength is all-consuming and all-encompassing. It is no lukewarm endeavor. It is total commitment of our very being—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually—to a love of the Lord.

The breadth, depth, and height of this love of God extend into every facet of one's life. Our desires, be they spiritual or temporal, should be rooted in a love of the Lord. Our thoughts and affections should be centered on the Lord. "Let all thy thoughts be directed unto the Lord," said Alma, "yea, let the affections of thy heart be placed upon the Lord forever" (Alma 37:36).

With these statements, I agree.

We show our love for God when we put Him first in our lives.

Why did God put the first commandment first? Because He knew that if we truly loved Him we would want to keep all of His other commandments. "For this is the love of God," says John, "that we keep his commandments" (1 John 5:3; see also 2 John 1:6).

Many Mormons assume that Christians don't believe in good works. This is simply not true. While Christians believe in justification by faith alone (by nothing we brought to the table), good works follow. First Thessalonians 4:3 says, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified." Ephesians 2:8-9 says ," For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." Yet the very next verse reads, "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Paul is not suggesting that antinomianism (lawlessness) should prevail. Rather, a genuine salvation will be followed by good works (fruit) that will be seen. The Christian is saved "unto" good works and not "by" good works.

We must put God in the forefront of everything else in our lives. He must come first, just as He declares in the first of His Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3).

Ahh, a great passage! Having "no other gods before me" includes any "false" gods.

When we put God first, all other things fall into their proper place or drop out of our lives. Our love of the Lord will govern the claims for our affection, the demands on our time, the interests we pursue, and the order of our priorities.

When we put God first, we will do whatever it takes to determine what is true and what is false. Jesus said in Matthew 7:15-20 says,

> Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. [16] By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? [17] Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. [18] A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. [19] Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. [20] Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

Galatians 1:8-9 distinguishes between a true and false gospel:

> [8] But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! [9] As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!
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> How can we determine a true gospel from one that is false? Acts 17:10-12 shows us that scripture (the Bible) must be utilized.
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> [10] As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. [11] Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. [12] As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.

We should put God ahead of everyone else in our lives.

When Joseph was in Egypt, what came first in his life—God, his job, or Potiphar's wife? When she tried to seduce him, he responded by saying, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9).

Joseph was put in prison because he put God first. If we were faced with a similar choice, where would we place our first loyalty? Can we put God ahead of security, peace, passions, wealth, and the honors of men?

When Joseph was forced to choose, he was more anxious to please God than to please his employer's wife. When we are required to choose, are we more anxious to please God than our boss, our teacher, our neighbor, or our date?

Joseph of Egypt was willing to go to prison rather than deny his loyalty to God.

The Lord said, “He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:37). One of the most difficult tests of all is when you have to choose between pleasing God or pleasing someone you love or respect—particularly a family member.

Nephi faced that test and handled it well when his good father temporarily murmured against the Lord (see 1 Nephi 16:18–25). Job maintained his integrity with the Lord even though his wife told him to curse God and die (see Job 2:9–10).

The scripture says, “Honour thy father and thy mother” (Exodus 20:12; see also Mosiah 13:20). Sometimes one must choose to honor Heavenly Father over a mortal father.

We should give God, the Father of our spirits, an exclusive preeminence in our lives. He has a prior parental claim on our eternal welfare, ahead of all other ties that may bind us here or hereafter.

How many people calling themselves Mormon remain in the LDS Church because they don’t want to upend the apple cart? This is because leaving the “one true Church” could cause a person to be disowned by his or her loved ones. Even a marriage in these circumstances might not be secure. The person may not believe the church anymore, but he or she stays because leaving could cause so many additional problems. In addition, I know people who left the Mormon Church and the bishop advised the spouse to get a divorce! With this, many remain status quo and just live a life of lies to keep peace.

God, our Father; Jesus, our Elder Brother and our Redeemer; and the Holy Ghost, the Testator, are perfect. They know us best and love us most and will not leave one thing undone for our eternal welfare. Should we not love them for it and honor them first? There are faithful members who joined the Church in spite of the objections of their mortal relatives. By putting God first, many later became the instruments to lead those loved ones into the kingdom of God.

I don’t believe Jesus is our “Elder Brother,” but I agree: If you are a Latter-day Saint who knows the church is not true but remains in it, I would consider taking a bold step of courage for your eternal welfare. My hope is you would not sidle up to atheism, as many ex-Mormons do, but rather discover a vibrant relationship with the Creator of the universe.

If someone wants to marry you outside the temple, whom will you strive to please—God or a mortal? If you insist on a temple marriage, you will be pleasing the Lord and blessing the other party. Why? Because that person will either become worthy to go to the temple—which would be a blessing—or will leave—which could also be a blessing—because neither of you should want to be unequally yoked (see 2 Corinthians 6:14).

Benson was pretty clear that "missionary dating" is not to be tolerated. This is *not* the view of many Mormons today. For more on this topic, click here and here.

You should qualify for the temple. Then you will know that there is no one good enough for you to marry outside the temple. If such individuals are that good, they will get themselves in a condition so that they too can be married in the temple.

Getting married in the temple means going through ceremonies that are not biblical in order for the family to be together forever. It is all part of Mormonism's false gospel.

When we choose to put God first in our lives, His blessings come in abundance.

Men and women who turn their lives over to God will discover that He can make a lot more out of their lives than they can. He will deepen their joys, expand their vision, quicken their minds, strengthen their muscles, lift their spirits, multiply their blessings, increase their opportunities, comfort their souls, raise up friends, and pour out peace. Whoever will lose his life in the service of God will find eternal life.

God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Had Abraham loved Isaac more than God, would he have consented? As the Lord indicates in the Doctrine and Covenants, both Abraham and Isaac now sit as gods (see D&C 132:37). They were willing to offer or to be offered up as God required. They have a deeper love and respect for each other because both were willing to put God first.

Christians don't uphold the Doctrine and Covenants as scripture. And the Bible never says that Abraham and Isaac "now sit as gods." This is part of Mormonism's false gospel.

The great test of life is obedience to God.

The great task of life is to learn the will of the Lord and then do it.

The great commandment of life is, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength" (Mark 12:30).

May God bless us to put the first commandment first and, as a result, reap peace in this life and eternal life with a fulness of joy in the life to come.

I conclude my review by declaring that the greatest commandment is to love God more than we love anything else. This means loving the truth. If Mormonism is true, it should be followed in whole. If it is a false gospel, then it must be abandoned and the truth should be pursued. If you are a Latter-day Saint, test your faith. As my friend Peter Barnes used to say, "A faith not worth testing is a faith not worth having."

Chapter 2: Pray Always

"If we would advance in holiness—increase in favor with God—nothing can take the place of prayer."

Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson

Jesus Christ has taught that we should pray always.

I'm not going to look at all the past chapters of previous "Teachings of Presidents of the Church," but off the top of my head, I don't remember an entire chapter in this series that was dedicated to prayer. I believe in prayer. It is the strength of the Christian's arsenal. Whenever possible, I have learned that prayer is the foundation to a Christian's faith.

If we would advance in holiness—increase in favor with God—nothing can take the place of prayer. And so I adjure you to give prayer—daily prayer—secret prayer—a foremost place in your lives. Let no day pass without it. Communion with the Almighty has been a source of strength, inspiration, and enlightenment to men and women through the world's history who have shaped the destinies of individuals and nations for good.

The Bible encourages the believer to pray without ceasing. May this be a part of who I am.

God is mindful of us and ready to respond to our prayers when we place our trust in Him and do that which is right.

There is power in prayer. All things are possible through prayer. It was through prayer that the heavens were opened in this dispensation. The prayer of a boy fourteen years of age, in the Sacred Grove, opened a new gospel dispensation, and brought forth a vision of the Father and the Son, as they appeared as glorified heavenly beings before the boy, Joseph [see Joseph Smith—History 1:11–17].15

Here comes the problem (and I'll complete my review this way). Using Joseph Smith's example when he was supposedly a 14-year-old boy, many Latter-day Saints believe that praying about the Book of Mormon and, in general, Mormonism is what God commands. There are several passages Mormons reference, but most prominent is James 1:5 in the New Testament. This was a pivotal verse for Mormonism's founder Joseph Smith, who claimed that he prayed to God for wisdom when he was fourteen years old. James 1:5 says, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him."

The official First Vision account says that Smith's prayer was answered in 1820 as he knelt in the woods near his upstate New York home. Located in the last chapter of the Book of Mormon, Moroni 10:4 also is regularly referenced by Mormon missionaries. It says, "And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost." An investigator is told that, through prayer, God will help a person understand that Mormonism really is true. Doctrine and Covenants 9:8 reads, "But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right."

The rules in Mormonism have been rigged since a person asking God for confirmation of the prayer (is this Book of Mormon from God?) really only has one answer. After all, the investigator who declines the invitation to pray may be accused of not believing in prayer. On the other hand, those who agree to pray but don't receive the "right" answer will probably be thought of as not having a sincere heart, real intent, or adequate faith.

There is a psychological edge that the Mormon missionaries have when someone agrees to their challenge to pray about the Book of Mormon. After all, the investigator may eventually get the "right" answer in an attempt to please the missionaries, close family members, or friends who have come to the same conclusion. In the end, one's good feelings may win the day, even if the object of the prayer is false. It should be noted that Joseph Smith disregarded the immediate context of James 1:5, which speaks of gaining wisdom, not knowledge.

Wisdom is the proper application of knowledge. In this verse James tells his Christian audience to ask God for wisdom when they are undergoing trials and temptations, not for testing various truth claims. First John 4:1 tells believers to "try [test] the spirits." Why? Because many false prophets have gone out into the world. The Bereans in Acts 17:11 were considered noble because they "searched the scriptures daily" and tested Paul's words against what God had already revealed. In other words, Christians are to test all truth claims with the Bible, not with subjective experiences, even if that experience involves a supernatural "vision."

When a Mormon friend brings up Moroni 10:4 in a conversation, you might ask your acquaintance whether his or her feelings have always been accurate. At one time or another, all of us have been fooled by our feelings, no matter how sincere we might have been. For example, Mormons believe that marriage is not only for life but also for eternity.

Should it be assumed that the many Mormon couples who are divorced did not pray about their relationships beforehand? Surely knowing information about another person that could have exposed potential behavior problems—such as drug addiction, sex addiction, pornography issues, inward apathy to God, or repressed anger—would have helped with making a more

informed decision. Yet how many Mormons must have "felt" God's approval in relationships that were tragically doomed from the beginning?

The Bible makes it very clear that subjective feelings can be deceptive. Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" Proverbs 14:12 warns, "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death," while Proverbs 28:26 adds that only fools trust in their heart. Because everyone is a fallen and sinful creature, it is possible to be swayed by emotions and desires. To believe something is true merely because one feels it to be true is no guarantee of truth.

Paul explained in 2 Timothy 2:15 that the believer must make the effort to study in order to correctly understand truth. In the next chapter (3:16–17), he added that all Scripture given by inspiration of God is "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" so that the man or woman of God might be competent and equipped to do good works. Christians are commanded in 1 Thessalonians 5:21 to "prove all things; hold fast that which is good." While it is true that faith does involve believing things that can't be proven, it is foolishness to believe something that has already been disproven. If the Bible disproves a spiritual truth claim, it must be rejected.

If praying about the Book of Mormon is the means for finding truth, shouldn't this test also apply to other religious books? It is curious how very few Mormons have taken the time and effort to read (and pray about) the scriptures of other religions. Using the rationale that people should pray about Mormonism's scripture, why shouldn't every religion's scriptures—such as the Qu'ran (Islam), the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita (Hinduism), and the Tripitaka (Buddhism)—also be read and contemplated through prayer?

How can the Mormon know the accuracy of Mormonism until he or she personally tests all religions in this way? Though we should most certainly use prayer to guide us in our search for truth, it should not be the only litmus test. Hopefully, prayer will lead us to the information we need in order to make an informed and proper decision.

Chapter 3: Freedom of Choice, an Eternal Principle

"Agency has been given to all of us to make important decisions that will have bearing on our salvation. Those decisions affect our happiness in eternity."

According to Mormonism, agency is the ability to choose right from wrong, which goes back to man's preexistence. The church manual *Gospel Principles* explains,

> "Agency makes our life on earth a period of testing to see whether we are worthy to become like our Heavenly Father. . . . Without the gift of agency, we would have been unable to show our Heavenly Father whether we would do all that he commanded us" (19).

According to James Faust, a former member of the First Presidency,

> "Free agency, given us through the plan of our Father, is the great alternative to Satan's plan of force. With this sublime gift, we can grow, improve, progress, and seek perfection. Without agency, none of us could grow and develop by learning from our mistakes and errors and those of others" ("The Great Imitator," *Ensign* (Conference Edition), November 1987, p. 35).

The premortal Jesus Christ followed Heavenly Father's plan of salvation, which preserved our freedom of choice.

Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson

Agency—freedom of choice—is a God-given, eternal principle.

I testify that we are the spirit offspring of a loving God, our Heavenly Father (see Acts 17:29; 1 Ne. 17:36). He has a great plan of salvation whereby His children might be perfected as He is and might have a fulness of joy as He enjoys. (See 1 Ne. 10:18; 2 Ne. 2:25; Alma 24:14; 34:9; 3 Ne. 12:48; 28:10.) I testify that in our premortal state our Elder Brother in the spirit, even Jesus Christ, became our foreordained Savior in the Father's plan of salvation. (See Mosiah 4:6–7; Alma 34:9.) He is the captain of our salvation and the only means through whom we can return to our Father in Heaven to gain that fulness of joy. (See Heb. 2:10; Mosiah 3:17; Alma 38:9.)

Leaders explain how Jesus was the first created being of God the Father and should be classified as not eternally god. In fact, it is taught that Jesus was the firstborn son of God the Father in the First Estate, called the preexistence allowing for humans to have "freedom of choice. Lucifer was another son who wanted to become the savior of the world. One of the more offensive

attributes designated to the Jesus of Mormonism is the claim that Jesus is the spirit-brother of Lucifer. Seventy Milton R. Hunter wrote,

> The appointment of Jesus to be the Savior of the world was contested by one of the other sons of God. He was called Lucifer, son of the morning. Haughty, ambitious, and covetous of power and glory, this spirit-brother of Jesus desperately tried to become the Savior of mankind. (*The Gospel through the Ages*, 15).

Mormon educator Jess L. Christensen said:

> On first hearing, the doctrine that Lucifer and our Lord, Jesus Christ, are brothers may seem surprising to some, especially to those unacquainted with latter-day revelations. But both the scriptures and the prophets affirm that Jesus Christ and Lucifer are indeed offspring of our Heavenly Father and, therefore, spirit brothers. . . . Both Jesus and Lucifer were strong leaders with great knowledge and influence. But as the First-born of the Father, Jesus was Lucifer's older brother. (*A Sure Foundation*, 223–24).

Ironically, the same passages of the Bible that expound on Christ's eternal deity also show that Lucifer could not be the brother of Christ. John 1:1–3 says that everything (including Lucifer) was made by Jesus, who was, is, and always will be God. Colossians 1:15, the one biblical verse used by Christensen, says that He (Jesus) "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature." However, this has nothing to do with Jesus and Satan being brothers. In fact, it proclaims Christ's deity ("image of the invisible God"). Verses 16–17 show that Christ created all things and that He is before all things, holding them together. Just as a person can look into the mirror to see a reflection, so too is Jesus the exact image of God.

I testify that Lucifer was also in the council of heaven. He sought to destroy the agency of man. He rebelled. (See Moses 4:3.) There was a war in heaven, and a third of the hosts were cast to the earth and denied a body. (See Rev. 12:7–9; D&C 29:36–37.) Lucifer is the enemy of all righteousness and seeks the misery of all mankind. (See 2 Ne. 2:18, 27; Mosiah 4:14.)

BYU professor Charles R. Harrell explains,

> Paul is not referring to premortal spirit birth, but to Christ becoming the firstborn in attaining God's glory, a status which would subsequently be attained by 'many brethren' (i.e., disciples).(*"This Is My Doctrine,"* 168).

Lest there be confusion over the term *firstborn,* it should be pointed out that the Greek word used is not *protoktistos* (meaning *first created*) but rather *prototokos* (meaning *firstborn*). Both Hebrews 1:3 and 2 Corinthians 4:4 point out that Christ is the exact representation of God. Referring to Colossians 1, Harrell writes on page 171 that this is "an unmistakable reference to

his [Jesus's] preeminence in the resurrection from the dead." He adds that "in the New Testament Christ is the firstborn in the sense of (1) being prior to and the source of all creation; (2) being the first to receive exaltation and glory, and (3) being the first to rise from the dead, 'that in all things he might have the preeminence' (Col. 1:18)."

The Bible adamantly declares Lucifer to be a creation of Jesus, not in any way the brother of Jesus. Besides, Jesus and Satan are as opposite as light and darkness. Satan merely tries to imitate an angel of light in order to fool as many people as possible (2 Cor. 11:14). Referring to humanity's premortal existence in heaven, Apostle Robert D. Hales taught that

> while we can't remember this time, we probably sat in meetings much like this, where the Father's plan for us was explained. We cannot remember that Lucifer, a son of God the Father, a brother of Jesus Christ, rebelled against God's plan and, in his rebellion, promised he would bring us all back home. But Lucifer would have denied us our free agency, the freedom to make decisions. We cannot remember that his plan was not accepted by us because, without choice, there would not have been a purpose for coming to this mortal probation. We would not have had opposition or repentance. We would not have learned obedience (*Ensign* (May 1990): 39).

Page 15 of *Gospel Principles* says, "After hearing both sons speak, Heavenly Father said, 'I will send the first' (Abraham 3:27)." Unfortunately, one third of the spirits chose Lucifer's plan that denied free choice; everyone who would end up receiving bodies by being born on the earth apparently chose Jesus. Thus, in this great rebellion, Satan and all the spirits who followed him were sent away from the presence of God and cast down from heaven. A third part of the hosts of heaven were punished for following Satan (see D&C 29:36). They were denied the right to receive mortal bodies. Because we are here on earth and have mortal bodies, we know that we chose to follow Jesus Christ and our Heavenly Father. . . . In our premortal life, we chose to follow Jesus Christ and accept God's plan.

As far as the issue of preexistence, there is no biblical support to show that there was ever a "war in heaven" or that there was choice before birth. This hasn't stopped LDS leaders from using biblical verses, albeit out of context, to support their position. For example, Jeremiah 1:5 is commonly quoted. It says, "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations."

Does the fact that Jeremiah is told by the sovereign God of the universe that He has a plan for the prophet, and that plan was formed before Jeremiah's birth mean that humans had a relationship with God in premortality? The answer is, quite simply, no. Notice that this verse says God knew Jeremiah before his birth; nowhere does it intimate that Jeremiah knew God. If God is omniscient (all-knowing) and sovereign, we would expect Him to know Jeremiah. The Bible is full of passages stating that God is in sovereign control, and, as such, His plans cannot be

thwarted by anyone. In fact, it's clear that God has a plan for everyone. It was God who determined who our parents would be (thus determining where we would be born), the color of our skin, the number of hairs on our head, and even our natural temperament. Nothing about our existence surprised God. He knew us, but nowhere is it inferred that we knew Him before birth.

Another verse sometimes used by Latter-day Saints is Ecclesiastes 12:7, which says, in part, "the spirit shall return unto God who gave it." This poetic book is describing how the body decomposes to "dust" and the spirit returns to God for judgment; this does not imply a preexistent state. Zechariah 12:1 states that God forms "the spirit of man within him." The assumption is not that man was composed solely of spirit in some premortal state but that man has a physical body in which the spirit dwells.

The central issue in that premortal council was: Shall the children of God have untrammeled agency to choose the course they should follow, whether good or evil, or shall they be coerced and forced to be obedient? Christ and all who followed Him stood for the former proposition—freedom of choice; Satan stood for the latter—coercion and force. The scriptures make clear that there was a great war in heaven, a struggle over the principle of freedom, the right of choice. (See Moses 4:1–4; D&C 29:36–38; 76:25–27; Rev. 12:7–9.) The war that began in heaven over this issue is not yet over. The conflict continues on the battlefield of mortality.

For the Pearl of Great Price and Doctrine and Covenants, Christians don't accept these books as scripture or authoritative. As far as Revelation 12:7-9, this passage refers to a future state of events and has never been interpreted as explaining something that happened in the past. In other words, the one biblical text provided does no good since it is taken out of context.

Freedom of choice is a God-given eternal principle. The great plan of liberty is the plan of the gospel. There is no coercion about it; no force, no intimidation. A man is free to accept the gospel or reject it. He may accept it and then refuse to live it, or he may accept it and live it fully. But God will never force us to live the gospel. He will use persuasion through His servants. He will call us and He will direct us and He will persuade us and encourage us and He will bless us when we respond, but He will never force the human mind. (See Hymns, 1985, no. 240.) This life is a time of testing in which we are free to choose between good and evil.

By saying "there is no coercion" about acceptance of the "plan of the gospel," it almost feels like a straw man argument–as if some say that God coerces people to become Christians. Which Christian has ever taught that people are "coerced" into accepting the gospel? I know not one.

Abraham was shown the spirit children of our Heavenly Father before they came to earth. He, too, was shown the creation of the earth, and the Lord said to him: "And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them." (Abraham 3:25.) In that divine statement is embodied also the right of choice.

The Book of Abraham has been proven to be a fraud. For more, see here.

This life is a probation: a probation in which you and I prove our mettle, a probation that has eternal consequences for each of us. And now is our time and season—as every generation has had theirs—to learn our duties and to do them.

That the Lord is displeased with wickedness is true. That He desires that it not occur is also true. That He will help those who oppose it is true. But that He allows wickedness to occur at all through His children here in mortality is proof of His having given them their freedom to choose, while reserving for Him a basis for their final judgment.

There is no evil that [Jesus Christ] cannot arrest. All things are in His hands. This earth is His rightful dominion. Yet He permits evil so that we can make choices between good and evil.

Life is a testing time in man's eternal existence, during which he is given … the right to choose between right and wrong. … On those choices hang great consequences, not only in this life, but, even more important, in the life to come. There are boundaries beyond which Satan cannot go. Within those bounds, he is presently being permitted to offer an unrighteous alternative to God's righteous principles, thus allowing men to choose between good and evil and thereby determine the station they shall occupy in the next life.

For Mormonism, the time of first choice took place before this world was even created. All people had to make a decision in the so-called preexistence: Jesus or Lucifer. Because of our choice of Jesus, Mormonism teaches that we were not cast out of heaven with Satan. We had the ability to come to this earth based on our merit (how good we were) in this previous life. And now people have the choice, LDS leaders assert, to choose the best God has in store for us. This is called the Celestial Kingdom.

The problem? Anyone listening to LDS teaching will soon see that nobody can keep the covenants they make on a regular basis, whether at Sacrament and at the temple. While everyone may have agency and choice, what does it matter if nobody could ever attain the very best this religion supposedly has to offer? It's the carrot in front of the horse: promised reward in an impossible setting.

We use our agency to make decisions that determine our happiness now and throughout eternity.

God loves you as He loves each and every one of His children, and His desire and purpose and glory is to have you return to Him pure and undefiled, having proven yourselves worthy of an eternity of joy in His presence.

Your Father in heaven is mindful of you. He has given you commandments to guide you, to discipline you. He has also given you your agency—freedom of choice—"to see if [you] will do

all things whatsoever [He] shall command." (Abr. 3:25.) His kingdom here on earth is well organized, and your leaders are dedicated to helping you. May you know that you have our constant love, our concern, and prayers.

Satan is also mindful of you. He is committed to your destruction. He does not discipline you with commandments, but offers instead a freedom to "do your own thing." … Satan's program is "play now and pay later." He seeks for all to be miserable like unto himself [see 2 Nephi 2:27]. The Lord's program is happiness now and joy forever through gospel living.

Again, notice how the only passages referenced are extrabiblical. Therefore, Christians cannot accept the basis of this teaching because it is not biblical.

We are free to choose, but we are not free to alter the consequences of those choices.

Clearly, there would be little trial of faith if we received our full reward immediately for every goodly deed, or immediate retribution for every sin. But that there will be an eventual reckoning for each, there is no question.

While a man may take some temporary pleasure in sin, the end result is unhappiness. "Wickedness never was happiness." (Alma 41:10.) Sin creates disharmony with God and is depressing to the spirit. Therefore, a man would do well to examine himself to see that he is in harmony with all of God's laws. Every law kept brings a particular blessing. Every law broken brings a particular blight. Those who are heavy-laden with despair should come unto the Lord, for his yoke is easy and his burden is light. (See Matt. 11:28–30.)24

But let's be honest: How is it possible to be in "harmony with all of God's laws"? Down deep, we all understand that we are all sinners. It is impossible to keep all of God's laws, no matter how hard a person tries. (For more on this topic, see www.themiracleofforgiveness.com to see how Benson's predecessor, Spencer W. Kimball, taught.) The Gospel means "Good News." Being told that a person merely needs to keep all of the commandments and there is hope is *not* good news. Instead, what is needed is forgiveness of sins. Perhaps you ought to take the "LDS Repentance Quiz" and see how you do.

The biggest business of any life is making decisions. While one of the greatest gifts of God to man is … the right of choice, he has also given man responsibility for these choices. … We put our own lives in the direction of success or failure. We may not only choose our ultimate goals, but we may also determine and decide for ourselves, in many cases, the means by which we will arrive at those goals, and by our industry or lack of it determine the speed by which they may be reached. This takes individual effort and energy and will not be without opposition or conflict.

The fate of humanity and all civilization hinges on whether man will use his … agency to govern himself or ignore eternal laws at his own peril and reap the consequences. The real issues of today are, therefore, not economic or political. They are spiritual—meaning that man must learn to conform to the laws which God has given to mankind.

Agency has been given to all of us to make important decisions that will have bearing on our salvation. Those decisions affect our happiness in eternity. Our decisions have made us what we are. Our eternal destiny will be determined by the decisions we yet will make.

Mormonism's version of the Gospel offers no hope. The onus is completely on the back of the individual Latter-day Saint. It is never possible to know if enough was done. This is a scary proposition. Instead of having to "do" for our justification of sins, the Bible teaches that the job has been "done" by none other than Jesus Christ.

Some Mormons misunderstand the gospel of grace and wonder if Christians believe they can just say a simple prayer and then have freedom (even permission) to sin like hell. After all, if salvation is free, why would good works even be necessary? Please toss this mistaken idea out the door and don't let it back in! I have never heard this message preached at any Christian church I've visited. It is true that salvation comes by grace through faith and that this does not come by works. (See Eph. 2:8-9.) This is what is known as justification.

As 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, a person becomes a new creation in Christ where old things pass away and all things become new. The believer becomes "born again," something not conjured up through a person's good works. Yet verse 10 says that the believer is "God's workmanship," created by Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared from the very foundation of the world. And James 2:14-26 says that faith without works is dead. These good works are part of what we call sanctification. As Philippians 2:12 says, Christians are to work "out" (not work "for") their salvation with fear and trembling. Good works are the fruit of a true salvation; while they are not what a person does to cause justification, it certainly plays a major role in sanctification and proving the new birth to be genuine.

See more on How can a person get into heaven? and How can I know I am saved?

Decisions of crucial importance require our prayerful effort.

Without going any further to see how Benson explains this, may I add an "amen" to this sentence. Christians believe in prayer, for both the big things as well as the little things.

If we are to make proper, Christ-like decisions, we must first of all live so we can reach out and tap that unseen power without which no man can do his best in decision making.

One of the greatest decisions of this age was when the boy Joseph Smith decided that he would follow the admonition in James: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed." (James 1:5–6.)

It has been show very often how James 1:5 has been taken out of context. For example, see here.

It should be noted that Joseph Smith disregarded the immediate context of James 1:5, which speaks of gaining wisdom, not knowledge. Wisdom is the proper application of knowledge. In this verse James tells his Christian audience to ask God for wisdom when they are undergoing trials and temptations, not for testing various truth claims. First John 4:1 tells believers to "try [test] the spirits."

Why? Because many false prophets have gone out into the world. The Bereans in Acts 17:11 were considered noble because they "searched the scriptures daily" and tested Paul's words against what God had already revealed. In other words, Christians are to test all truth claims with the Bible, not with subjective experiences, even if that experience involves a supernatural "vision." For more on this topic, see here.

The very salvation of millions of men and women in the dispensation of the fulness of times depends upon that decision! We must keep in mind that individuals do matter and that decisions they make may greatly affect the lives of others.

The decision of whether or not to follow Joseph Smith is crucial. If Smith really was a prophet, then he should be followed at all cost. If he was a fraud, he should be soundly rejected. There is no middle ground. Your decision on Smith (and Mormonism as a religion) will have either considerable rewards or grave consequences.

The Lord said, "Knock and it shall be opened unto you" (3 Nephi 14:7; Matthew 7:7). In other words, it requires effort on our part.

Knock and see. This same Jesus in Matthew 7 also said,

> 15 "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are
> ravenous wolves. 16 You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from
> thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the
> diseased tree bears bad fruit. 18 A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased
> tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown
> into the fire. 20 Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

It requires effort on our part to do the research and make sure we're not following a fraud. There is so much to lose by trusting wolves.

Wise decisions are usually arrived at following work, struggle, and prayerful effort. The Lord's response to Oliver Cowdery's ineffective effort makes this clear: "But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right." (D&C 9:8.)

The Bible makes it very clear that subjective feelings can be deceptive. Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" Proverbs 14:12 warns, "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death," while Proverbs 28:26 adds that only fools trust in their hearts. Because everyone is a fallen and sinful creature, it is possible to be swayed by emotions and desires. To believe something is true merely because one feels it to be true is no guarantee of truth. Jesus commanded His followers in Mark 12:30 to love God "with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength."

Paul explained in 2 Timothy 2:15 that the believer must make the effort to study in order to correctly understand truth. In the next chapter (3:16-17), he added that all Scripture given by inspiration of God is "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" so that the man or woman of God might be competent and equipped to do good works. Christians are commanded in 1 Thessalonians 5:21 to "prove all things; hold fast that which is good." While it is true that faith does involve believing things that can't be proven, it is foolishness to believe something that has already been disproven. If the Bible disproves a spiritual truth claim, it must be rejected.

We are agents unto ourselves, and the Lord expects us to do good things of our own free will.

In 1831 the Lord said this to his Church:

"For behold, it is not meet that I should command in all things; for he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant; wherefore he receiveth no reward.

"Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness;

"For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as men do good they shall in nowise lose their reward.

"But he that doeth not anything until he is commanded, and receiveth a commandment with doubtful heart, and keepeth it with slothfulness, the same is damned." (D&C 58:26–29.)

The Lord wants us to use our agency to be "anxiously engaged in a good cause" (D&C 58:27).

The Latter-day Saint is required to be on best behavior and not have any "slothfulness." Otherwise there is damnation (which, in Mormonism, typically is understood to mean that there will be no way to reach the celestial kingdom). Since Benson is quoting D&C 58, let's go down a few more verses. It reads:

> 42 Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more. 43 By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins—behold, he will confess them and forsake them.

Many Latter-day Saints like to say that repentance is the cure-all for receiving forgiveness of sins. These verses say, however, that confession is only one part of the process. Forsaking them is the next. Indeed, as D&C 82:7 says,

> And now, verily I say unto you, I, the Lord, will not lay any sinto your charge; go your ways and sin no more; but unto that soul who sinneth shall the former sins return, saith the Lord your God.

What a heavy burden this is!

Chapter 4: Living Joyfully in Troubled Times

With faith in our Heavenly Father, we can have hope for the future, optimism in our present tasks, and inner peace.

We will all have disappointments and discouragements—that is part of life. But if we will have faith, our setbacks will be but a moment and success will come out of our seeming failures. Our Heavenly Father can accomplish miracles through each of us if we will but place our confidence and trust in Him.

It is a great blessing to have an inner peace, to have an assurance, to have a spirit of serenity and inward calm during times of strife and struggle, during times of sorrow and reverses. It is soul-satisfying to know that God is at the helm, that He is mindful of His children, and that we can with full confidence place our trust in Him.

Prayer—persistent prayer—can put us in touch with God, our greatest source of comfort and counsel. “Pray always, that you may come off conqueror.” (D&C 10:5.) “Exerting all my powers to call upon God to deliver me” is how the young Joseph Smith describes the method that he used in the Sacred Grove to keep the adversary from destroying him. (JS—H 1:16.)

Without faith in our Heavenly Father, we cannot be successful. Faith gives us vision of what may happen, hope for the future, and optimism in our present tasks. Where faith is, we do not doubt the ultimate success of the work.

Of all people, we as Latter-day Saints should be the most optimistic and the least pessimistic. For while we know that “peace shall be taken from the earth, and the devil shall have power over his own dominion,” we are also assured that “the Lord shall have power over his saints, and shall reign in their midst.” (D&C 1:35–36.)

With the assurance that the Church shall remain intact with God directing it through the troubled times ahead, it then becomes our individual responsibility to see that each of us remains faithful to the Church and its teachings. “He that remaineth steadfast and is not overcome, the same shall be saved.” (JS—M 1:11.)

In this chapter that focuses on living joyfully even when life’s circumstances don’t cooperate, Benson is quoted as saying how important it is to remain ”faithful to the Church and its teachings.” In a talk titled “Receiving a Testimony of Light and Truth” given at the October 2014 General Conference, Apostle Dieter F. Uchtdorf provided four points for Latter-day Saints to consider. They were (with commentary following each point):

> First, you must search the word of God. That means reading the scriptures and studying the words of the ancient as well as modern prophets regarding the restored gospel of Jesus Christ—not with an intent to doubt or criticize but with a sincere desire to discover truth. Ponder upon the things you will feel, and prepare your minds to receive the truth. "Even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you … that ye can give place for [the word of God]."

I for one would agree with this if "scriptures" meant only the Bible. However, he refers to the Standard Works. Still, I challenge my Latter-day Saint friends to read the book of Romans and see if what it teaches coincides with Latter-day Saint teaching.

> Second, you must consider, ponder, fearlessly strive to believe, and be grateful for how merciful the Lord has been to His children from the time of Adam to our day by providing prophets, seers, and revelators to lead His Church and help us find the way back to Him.

Everything goes back to the church. Yet how do we know that the "prophets, seers, and revelators" of the LDS Church can be trusted?

> Third, you must ask your Heavenly Father, in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, to manifest the truth of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints unto you. Ask with a sincere heart and with real intent, having faith in Christ.

We dealt with this issue in chapter 2's rebuttal of *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Ezra Taft Benson*. I encourage you to go back and look at my response to this. For more, see here.

> There is also a fourth step, given to us by the Savior: "If any man will do [God's] will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself." In other words, when you are trying to verify the truth of gospel principles, you must first live them. Put gospel doctrine and Church teachings to the test in your own life. Do it with real intent and enduring faith in God. If you will do these things, you have a promise from God—who is bound by His word—that He will manifest the truth to you by the power of the Holy Ghost. He will grant you greater light that will allow you to look through the darkness and witness unimaginably glorious vistas incomprehensible to mortal sight.

The Mormon religion is entirely based on "do" "do" do" and yet it's never thought to be "done," as Mormon theology offers no assurance that a person has done enough to qualify for the celestial kingdom. Instead of running around with our heads cut off, Christianity says the work is "done" because Jesus paid the price; only then are we are freed to do what He has commanded. Good works follows a genuine conversation but never precedes it. Mormonism contains

backwards theology, with no satisfaction that the weight of our sins could ever be earned through one's own effort.

At the fall 2013 general conference, Uchtdorf gave a talk titled "Come Join With Us." In what appears to be a catchy little segment, the apostle answered the question "But what about my doubts?"

He said

> It's natural to have questions—the acorn of honest inquiry has often sprouted and matured into a great oak of understanding. There are few members of the Church who, at one time or another, have not wrestled with serious or sensitive questions. One of the purposes of the Church is to nurture and cultivate the seed of faith—even in the sometimes sandy soil of doubt and uncertainty. Faith is to hope for things which are not seen but which are true. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters—my dear friends—please, first doubt your doubts before you doubt your faith. We must never allow doubt to hold us prisoner and keep us from the divine love, peace, and gifts that come through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Is doubting your doubts wise advice, especially since the Bible says in 1 Thessalonians 5:21 to "test everything"? Is this what we normally do with life-and-death situations? Imagine if a wife asked, "Honey, did you turn the stove off?" and the husband replied, "Babe, just doubt your doubts!" Or what about if you're not sure if you have enough gas to get to your next destination in the desert? Perhaps you should just doubt your doubts! A person who has constant headaches and wonders if there could be a possible tumor inside should certainly ignore these symptoms, right? Or should a person who believes he could balance himself from the eighth story ledge be encouraged to ignore all doubts and just do it?

Many more examples could be given. The point is that doubts should not just be ignored. I'm not saying it is possible to empirically make your doubts go away, but some research and testing would certainly be helpful to see if the doubts in play have any foundations that ought to be considered.

And so the same should be with Mormonism? If you have doubts about:

- Joseph Smith's integrity
- The Book of Mormon story
- The Book of Abraham "translation"
- Mormonism's compatibility with the teachings of the Bible

then researching these issues would be the wisest move possible. As my friend Peter Barnes used to say, truth never runs from error but error always runs from truth. Blindly remaining "faithful to the Church" when there's smoke in the kitchen is certainly foolish.

Happiness must be earned from day to day, but it is worth the effort. We have no cause to really worry. Live the gospel, keep the commandments. Attend to your prayers night and morning in your home. Maintain the standards of the Church. Try and live calmly and cheerfully. … Happiness must be earned from day to day. But it is worth the effort.

If this paragraph wasn't so serious, it would be laughable. "No cause to really worry"? Tell that to the many depressed Latter-day Saints who don't know where they'll go if they die in their sleep tonight. They have no assurance that they have done everything they need to do in order to reach their version of Nirvana, the Celestial Kingdom. They try hard, but they can't "maintain the standards of the Church." They want to "live calmly and cheerfully," but down deep they know they aren't successful in doing what they are told. What Benson is offering here is a false bill of sales. A wise person would reject this teaching.

If you are a person who has accepted Mormonism and turned off the waves to your brain, then I suggest doing some more research. Test out this religion and see if it stands the test. True happiness is found only in an authentic relationship with the Jesus of the Bible. Find out how you can know for sure that you are forgiven of your sins and are assured of going to His kingdom.

When George A. Smith was very ill, he was visited by his cousin, the Prophet Joseph Smith. The afflicted man reported: "He [the Prophet] told me I should never get discouraged, whatever difficulties might surround me. If I were sunk into the lowest pit of Nova Scotia and all the Rocky Mountains piled on top of me, I ought not to be discouraged, but hang on, exercise faith, and keep up good courage, and I should come out on the top of the heap." … Be cheerful in all that you do. Live joyfully. Live happily. Live enthusiastically, knowing that God does not dwell in gloom and melancholy, but in light and love.

Willing oneself to recovery is not enough. The first step is getting onto the right path. If Mormonism is not what its leaders claim it to be, then it behooves the Latter-day Saint to do what is necessary to come into a relationship with God and Jesus as described in the Bible.

"To live happily is to grow in spiritual strength toward perfection."

Heavenly Father wants us to be happy, and He will bless us as we follow His will for us.

"Men are that they might have joy" (2 Nephi 2:25). Our Heavenly Father wants us to be happy. He expects us to be happy. But there is no happiness in a letting down of standards. There is no happiness when you fail to live according to your convictions, according to that which you know

to be right. It is so easy to form the habit of taking it just a little easy on certain things. It is so easy to form the habit of faultfinding, or criticizing, of carrying in our hearts reservations regarding certain things in the Church. It is so easy for us to become a bit bitter, and then dwell on that, to become sad and carry a sad face with us. A sad face never won a battle in war or love.

Happiness not based on Truth is fleeting. Emotions make a person go up and down. True happiness is found only in a personal relationship with God.

Do we realize that happiness here and now consists in freely, lovingly, joyfully acknowledging God's will for us—and doing it in all ways and all affairs big and small? To live perfectly is to live happily.

The question is, who reading this article is living "perfectly"? (The author certainly is not!) Is perfection even attainable today? If so, who is successful in this endeavor?

For more information, see:

- "Becoming Perfect Before the Lord"
- "Jorge Zaballos Attempt at the Impossible"
- Review of Anthony Sweat's "I'm Not Perfect. Can I Still Go to Heaven?"
- For a two-part podcast series on the "Perils of Perfectionism," go to:
    - Part 1
    - Part 2

We will never be alone if we live as we should, because our Father will always be with us to bless us. He wants us to be successful. He wants us to be happy. He wants us to achieve the good goals we set. He will do His part if we do our part.

To me, these sentences epitomize the saddest aspect of the Mormon religion. To capture the power of that last sentence, let's read it backwards: "If we do our part, He will do our part." Ladies and gentleman, Jesus has already done His part. Romans 5:6-8 says,

> 6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— 8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

To think that we have to do our part before He can do ours is as unbiblical a concept as there ever was. The Mormon system is completely bankrupt and can never save a drowning man from his sins.

Chapter 5: Principles of True Repentance

In his first general conference address as President of the Church, President Ezra Taft Benson stated: "As I have sought direction from the Lord, I have had reaffirmed in my mind and heart the declaration of the Lord to 'say nothing but repentance unto this generation.' (D&C 6:9; 11:9.) This has been a theme of every latter-day prophet."

The issue of repentance is important to Latter-day Saints. It's absolutely vital for Christians as well. When Benson refers to "the sweet peace of forgiveness," though, it must be understood that this is something Mormonism does not—even *can not*—offer, as I'll explain later in this review.

Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson

To truly repent, we must first realize that the gospel plan is the plan of happiness.

In the usual sense of the term, Church membership means that a person has his or her name officially recorded on the membership records of the Church. …

But the Lord defines a member of His kingdom in quite a different way. In 1828, through the Prophet Joseph Smith, He said, "Behold, this is my doctrine—whosoever repenteth and cometh unto me, the same is my church." (D&C 10:67; italics added.) To Him whose Church this is, membership involves far more than simply being a member of record.

I would therefore like to set forth important concepts that we must understand and apply if we are to truly repent and come unto the Lord.

In the first point of this chapter, Benson says that a member of the church is not just baptized but must also repent and "come unto me." It is agreed that repentance plays a major role in Mormonism.

Faith in Jesus Christ precedes true repentance.

A second concept that is important to our understanding is the relationship of repentance to the principle of faith. Repentance is the second fundamental principle of the gospel. The first is that we must have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Why is this so? Why must faith in the Lord precede true repentance?

To answer this question, we must understand something about the atoning sacrifice of the Master. Lehi taught that "no flesh … can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah." (2 Ne. 2:8.) Even the most just and upright man cannot

save himself solely on his own merits, for, as the Apostle Paul tells us, "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." (Rom. 3:23.)

If it were not for the perfect, sinless life of the Savior, which He willingly laid down for us, there could be no remission of sins.

Therefore, repentance means more than simply a reformation of behavior. Many men and women in the world demonstrate great willpower and self-discipline in overcoming bad habits and the weaknesses of the flesh. Yet at the same time they give no thought to the Master, sometimes even openly rejecting Him. Such changes of behavior, even if in a positive direction, do not constitute true repentance.

Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is the foundation upon which sincere and meaningful repentance must be built. If we truly seek to put away sin, we must first look to Him who is the Author of our salvation.

Benson says "faith in the Lord" necessary before repentance can take place, which sounds very similar to what is believed in Christianity. Of course, Christians believe that repentance and faith in God go hand in hand. The word *repent* literally means to "turn away from sin" and is an attitude beginning at conversion. As the Christian song goes, "I have decided to follow Jesus, I have decided to follow Jesus, I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back."

In Mormonism, however, there are two different meanings when it comes to defining salvation: Individual or personal salvation (more correctly termed "exaltation") and general salvation that everyone receives through the Atonement and grace. According to tenth LDS President Joseph Fielding Smith:

> Salvation is twofold: General – that which comes to all men irrespective of a belief (in this life) in Christ- and, Individual – that which man merits through his own acts through life and by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel (*Doctrines of Salvation* 1:134).

The road to individual salvation begins with a belief that Joseph Smith was a true prophet sent by God. Smith stated that there is "No Salvation Without Accepting Joseph Smith" (*Doctrines of Salvation* 1:189). Exaltation requirements include living a life of good works and temple participation. Keeping the whole law is absolutely essential, as Smith said, "Those who gain exaltation in the celestial kingdom are those who are members of the Church of the Firstborn; in other words, those who keep ALL of the commandments of the Lord" (*Doctrines of Salvation* 2:41). General salvation, otherwise called salvation by grace, was obtained through the death of Christ and is nothing more than universal resurrection, which occurs to all people regardless of their beliefs or lifestyle.

When discussing this issue with Latter-day Saints, it's vital to provide precise definitions or we end up talking past each other. A Christian who says that salvation comes by grace might have his Mormon friend completely agree, as general salvation *does* come by grace and the atonement. Yet there is a deeper meaning to the word salvation, which results in exaltation. Grace does not mean the same thing to a Mormon as it does a Christian.

President David O. McKay warned that "the fallacy that Jesus has done all for us, and live as we may, if on our deathbed, we only believe, we shall be saved in his glorious presence, is most pernicious."(G*ospel Ideals*, comp. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: *Improvement Era*, 1953), 8). Ironically, some Latter-day Saints have even told us that they believe they can make up for lost time after death. Such thinking undermines the LDS concept of a mortal probation, which is the short time on this earth "linking the eternity past with the eternity future."

Benson can say that Jesus is "the Author of our salvation," but when it comes to individual salvation (exaltation), this simply isn't true.

Repentance involves a mighty change of heart.

The third important principle for us to understand if we would be true members of the Church is that repentance involves not just a change of actions, but a change of heart.

Can human hearts be changed? Why, of course! It happens every day in the great missionary work of the Church. It is one of the most widespread of Christ's modern miracles. If it hasn't happened to you—it should.

When we have undergone this mighty change, which is brought about only through faith in Jesus Christ and through the operation of the Spirit upon us, it is as though we have become a new person. Thus, the change is likened to a new birth. Thousands of you have experienced this change. You have forsaken lives of sin, sometimes deep and offensive sin, and through applying the blood of Christ in your lives, have become clean. You have no more disposition to return to your old ways. You are in reality a new person. This is what is meant by a change of heart.

As mentioned above, Christians hold that a person becomes, as 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, a "new creation; behold, all things are passed away, behold all things have become new." I agree that it is important to "forsake lives of sin" and "apply the blood of Jesus in your lives," but these are not things we do in order to attain justification from sin. Good works taking place after justification of sins is called sanctification, and yes, a true conversion heads a person in a new direction.

Godly sorrow leads to true repentance.

The fourth concept I would like to stress is what the scriptures term "godly sorrow" for our sins. It is not uncommon to find men and women in the world who feel remorse for the things they do wrong. Sometimes this is because their actions cause them or loved ones great sorrow and misery. Sometimes their sorrow is caused because they are caught and punished for their actions. Such worldly feelings do not constitute "godly sorrow."

In the Eastern Hemisphere, the Apostle Paul labored among the people of Corinth. After reports came of serious problems among the Saints, including immorality (see 1 Cor. 5:1), Paul wrote a sharp letter of rebuke. The people responded in the proper spirit, and evidently the problems were corrected, for in his second epistle to them, Paul wrote: "Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner. …

"For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death." (2 Cor. 7:9–10.)

In both of these scriptures, godly sorrow is defined as a sorrow that leads us to repentance.

Godly sorrow is a gift of the Spirit. It is a deep realization that our actions have offended our Father and our God. It is the sharp and keen awareness that our behavior caused the Savior, He who knew no sin, even the greatest of all, to endure agony and suffering. Our sins caused Him to bleed at every pore. This very real mental and spiritual anguish is what the scriptures refer to as having "a broken heart and a contrite spirit." (See 3 Ne. 9:20; Moro. 6:2; D&C 20:37; 59:8; Ps. 34:18; 51:17; Isa. 57:15.) Such a spirit is the absolute prerequisite for true repentance.

On the surface, a Christian would not have problems with Benson's words. Godly sorrow leads to repentance. Yet when quotes are taken from all over the place and placed into a manual like this, perhaps the context of what Benson was saying has become distorted.

Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ are anxious to see us change our lives, and They will help us.

The next principle I would like to discuss is this: No one is more anxious to see us change our lives than the Father and the Savior. In the book of Revelation is a powerful and profound invitation from the Savior. He says, "I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him." (Rev. 3:20.) Note that He does not say, "I stand at the door and wait for you to knock." He is calling, beckoning, asking that we simply open our hearts and let Him in.

Inspired by this verse found in Revelation, some portray Jesus patiently waiting for the sinner to open the door to his or heart. This is the interpretation given by Benson. However, this misunderstands the meaning intended by Jesus. This portion of the Book of Revelation was written to Christians (not unbelievers) in the church at Laodicea. These believers had become

complacent in their attitude toward Jesus. As James 2:20 teaches, good works are the necessary sign that accompany true faith, but the Christians at Laodicea fell into the bad habit of producing value-free works. They had lost their zeal for Christ and their works proved it. Rather than leave Christians to this diminished life, Jesus persists patiently, calling them to realize our error and return to a close walk with Him.

We must not lose hope as we seek to become Christlike.

The sixth and final point I wish to make about the process of repentance is that we must be careful, as we seek to become more and more godlike, that we do not become discouraged and lose hope. Becoming Christlike is a lifetime pursuit and very often involves growth and change that is slow, almost imperceptible.

We must not lose hope. Hope is an anchor to the souls of men. Satan would have us cast away that anchor. In this way he can bring discouragement and surrender. But we must not lose hope. The Lord is pleased with every effort, even the tiny, daily ones in which we strive to be more like Him. Though we may see that we have far to go on the road to perfection, we must not give up hope.

For those who pay the price required by true repentance, the promise is sure. You can be clean again. The despair can be lifted. The sweet peace of forgiveness will flow into your lives.

"True repentance is based on and flows from faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no other way."

I hope we will not live in the past. People who live in the past don't have very much future. There is a great tendency for us to lament about our losses, about decisions that we have made that we think in retrospect were probably wrong decisions. There is a great tendency for us to feel badly about the circumstances with which we are surrounded, thinking they might have been better had we made different decisions. We can profit by the experience of the past. But let us not spend our time worrying about decisions that have been made, mistakes that have been made. Let us live in the present and in the future.

As I have mentioned in other places of this review, the language given by Benson seems very biblical. On face value, it is. But what I have found interesting about this chapter is that it is missing some of the nuances given by other leaders. I have not done a complete check of Benson's writings on this topic, but it feels like this is a chapter that is meant not to rock the boat. The following paragraphs in the manual seem to sound more like the heart of Mormonism than what has been presented so far.

My beloved brothers and sisters, as we seek to qualify to be members of Christ's Church—members in the sense in which He uses the term, members who have repented and come unto Him—let us remember these six principles. . . . .

If we will strive to incorporate these principles into our lives and implement them on a daily basis, we shall then qualify to be more than members of record in the Church of Jesus Christ. As true members, we have claim to His promise: "Whosoever is of my church, and endureth of my church to the end, him will I establish upon my rock, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against them." (D&C 10:69.)

My prayer is that we may all win that promise for ourselves.

Here it says that it is necessary to "seek to qualify to be members of Christ's Church" and how it is important to "strive" to make this happen. To accomplish this, a person must endure to the end. This sounds more like the language typically given by other LDS leaders when this topic is discussed. Based on Benson's closing, let's take a closer look at what Mormonism's repentance is all about.

First of all, Mormonism teaches that the work necessary to attain exaltation must be accomplished in this life. Alma 34:32–33 in the Book of Mormon states,

> For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors. And now, as I said unto you before, as ye have had so many witnesses, therefore, I beseech of you that ye do not procrastinate the day of your repentance until the end; for after this day of life, which is given us to prepare for eternity, behold, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed.

Referring to this passage in Alma, one LDS student manual shows the importance of obedience:

> Amulek made it clear that we are, by our daily choices, ultimately giving ourselves over to the control or influence of either the Spirit of the Lord or the spirit of the devil. President Harold B. Lee (1899–1973) gave the following explanation of Alma 34:34: "To those who die in their wicked state, not having repented, the scriptures say the devil shall seal them as his own (see Alma 34:34), which means that until they have paid the uttermost farthing for what they have done, they shall not be redeemed from his grasp. When they shall have been subjected to the buffetings of Satan sufficient to have satisfied justice, then they shall be brought forth out of the grasp of Satan and shall be assigned to that place in our Father's celestial, terrestrial, or telestial world merited by their life upon this earth." (*The Teachings of Harold B. Lee,* ed., Clyde J. Williams [1996], 59). Elder Melvin J. Ballard (1873–1939) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles emphasized the

> importance of repenting during mortality: "This life is the time in which men are to repent. Do not let any of us imagine that we can go down to the grave not having overcome the corruptions of the flesh and then lose in the grave all our sins and evil tendencies. They will be with us. They will be with the spirit when separated from the body. Amulek made it clear that we are, by our daily choices, ultimately giving ourselves over to the control or influence of either the Spirit of the Lord or the spirit of the devil. . . . [Mortality] is the time when men are more pliable and susceptible" [Sept 22, 1922], 11–12. (*Book of Mormon Student Manual*, 230–31; ellipses in original)

Benson's predecessor, Spencer W. Kimball, stated:

> Only as we overcome shall we become perfect and move toward godhood. As I have indicated previously, the time to do this is *now,* in mortality. Someone once said: "A fellow who is planning to reform is one step behind. He ought to quit planning and get on with the job. *Today* is the day." (*The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 210).

Kimball also said:

> Because men are prone to postpone action and ignore directions, the Lord has repeatedly given strict injunctions and issued solemn warnings. Again and again in different phraseology and throughout the centuries the Lord has reminded man so that he could never have excuse. And the burden of the prophetic warning has been that *the time to act is now, in this mortal life.* One cannot with impunity delay his compliance with God's commandments. (*The Miracle of Forgiveness*, 9-10)

When Mormons are confronted with the fact that they cannot keep all of the commandments, many find refuge in their ability to repent. Repentance, they say, erases the transgression and makes everything all right. This attitude is certainly frowned upon in church teachings. For instance, "abandonment of sin" is continually stressed: "although confession is an essential element of repentance, it is not enough. The Lord has said, 'By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins—behold, he will confess them and forsake them' (D&C 58:43)." (*True to the Faith*, 134). Utilizing this D&C verse, *Gospel Principles* states on page 110,

> Our sincere sorrow should lead us to forsake (stop) our sins. If we have stolen something, we will steal no more. If we have lied, we will lie no more. If we have committed adultery, we will stop.

Kimball said,

> The forsaking of sin must be a permanent one. True repentance does not permit making the same mistake again. (*Repentance Brings Forgiveness,* 1984).

Brian D. Garner of the Church Correlation Department utilized a number of LDS scriptural verses to show how "this principle with a promise" requires both repentance and good works, as he italicized the word *and* in each reference to emphasize how forgiveness does not happen without both parts. (*Ensign* (December 2013): 43). Verses he cited are D&C 1:32, 3 Nephi 9:22; 10:6; 21:22; Moses 6:52; D&C 5:21. For example, when speaking about D&C 1:32, he writes, "He that repents *and* does the commandments of the Lord."

A student manual explains,

> D&C 58:42–43. The Lord Promises Complete Forgiveness to Those Who Truly Repent. The Lord forgives those who truly repent of their sins. This blessing comes through the Atonement of Christ, who "suffered . . . for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent" (D&C 19:16). The Lord promises that He will no more remember the sins of those who repent (see Ezekiel 18:21–22). Repentance, however, requires that we forsake and turn completely from our sins and confess them. (*Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual: Religion 324–325*, 122; ellipses in original).

While Seventy Claudio D. Zivic told an April 2014 general conference audience that "there is a need of constant repentance" (*Ensign* (May 2014): 40), such a philosophy seems self-defeating because a person who has to constantly repent must not be doing what should be possible in the first place. After all, the Mormon prophet Nephi supposedly said in 1 Nephi 3:7 how "the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them."

Another verse that ought to bring consternation to the sincere Latter-day Saint is D&C 82:7, which says, "And now, verily I say unto you, I, the Lord, will not lay any sin to your charge; go your ways and sin no more; but unto that soul who sinneth shall the former sins return, saith the Lord your God." A Doctrine and Covenants resource provides guidance for the instructor:

> Doctrine and Covenants 82:7. We are commanded to forsake sin. If we sin again after repenting, our former sins return. (5–10 minutes) Bring several rocks to class that are all labeled with the same sin (for example, breaking the Word of Wisdom). Tell students a story about an imaginary person who commits this sin. Invent details to embellish your story. Each time the imaginary person commits the sin, pick up a rock, until you are holding several of them. Set all the rocks you are holding aside and ask: What might setting the rocks aside represent? (Repentance.) What happens to our sins when we repent? (The Lord forgives them.) Read Doctrine and Covenants 82:7 and look for what happens when we sin again. Ask: How many rocks would a person need to pick up if he

> sins after repenting? (All that you were previously holding plus a new one.) Why do you think our former sins return? What does that teach you about the importance of forsaking sin? How can knowing this doctrine help you avoid sin? (*Doctrine and Covenants and Church History Seminary Teacher Resource Manual*, 134)

There is no doubt that, in Mormonism, keeping commandments after repentance is made is *not* just a suggestion but a concrete requirement. Quoting D&C 1:31, a reference handbook states,

> The Lord has said that He "cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance" (D&C 1:31). The result of sin is the withdrawal of the Holy Ghost and, in eternity, being unable to dwell in the presence of our Heavenly Father, for "no unclean thing can dwell with God" (1 Nephi 10:21). (*True to the Faith*, 163).

Referring to this same D&C passage, Kimball said,

> In his preface to modern revelation, the Lord outlined what is one of the most difficult requirements in true repentance. For some it is the hardest part of repentance, because it puts one on guard for the remainder of his life. . . . This scripture is most precise. First, one repents. Having gained that ground he then must live the commandments of the Lord to retain his vantage point. This is necessary to secure complete forgiveness. (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball*, 43.)

In an article written to Mormon youth, Jay E. Jensen, a member of the Presidency of the Seventy, said,

> Another prerequisite or condition to repentanceis to know that no unclean thing can dwell with God (see 1 Ne. 10:21;1 Ne. 15:34; Alma 7:21; Alma 40:26; and Hel. 8:25). You can hide sins from your bishop, you can hide them from your parents and friends, but if you continue and die with unresolved sins, you are unclean and no unclean thingcan dwell with God. There are no exceptions. ("The Message: Do You Know How to Repent?" *New Era*, November 1999, 7).

Kimball also said that the "repentance which merits forgiveness" is the kind in which the former transgressor must have reached a "point of no return" to sin

> wherein there is not merely a renunciation but also a deep abhorrence of the sin—where the sin becomes most distasteful to him and where the desire or urge to sin is cleared out of his life. (Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, 170. See also the First Presidency Message, "God Will Forgive," *Ensign* (March 1982)).

Having approached a number of LDS leaders , including those in Salt Lake City, and having them agree with his definition, former Mormon Mark Champneys succinctly summarized Mormonism's teaching with just two sentences:

> In Mormonism, before you can be forgiven of a particular sin by the atonement, you must successfully stop that sin permanently. So, in order to be forgiven of all sin for time and all eternity, you must successfully stop all sin permanently.

Saying that "after doing all they can to repent, some [Mormons] worry whether they have been forgiven," Brian D. Garner of the Church Correlation Department said it's possible for Mormons to know that repentance has taken place. How? He says that "when we regularly feel the influence of the Holy Ghost in our lives, we can be assured that the Lord has forgiven us." (*Ensign* (December 2013): 43) However, the Bible says that our feelings can mislead us, no matter how sincere we are. (See Jeremiah 17:9, for instance.)

Let's be honest, no sinner who has lived has found success in permanently ceasing from sin. For any Mormon to think it is possible to consistently obey God's commandments is to demonstrate the epitome of prideful arrogance. Pride, it should be pointed out, is a sin, showing that an individual has violated celestial law. (See Proverbs 16:18; 29:23; Obadiah 1:3; Zephaniah 2:10; Mark 7:22; 1 John 2:16.) To such a person comes the condemnation of Alma 5:27–28 in the Book of Mormon*:*

> Have ye walked, keeping yourselves blameless before God? Could ye say, if ye were called to die at this time, within yourselves, that ye have been sufficiently humble? That your garments have been cleansed and made white through the blood of Christ, who will come to redeem his people from their sins? Behold, are ye stripped of pride? I say unto you, if ye are not ye are not prepared to meet God. Behold ye must prepare quickly; for the kingdom of heaven is soon at hand, and such an one hath not eternal life.

Other Book of Mormon passages, including 2 Nephi 28:12–15 and Jacob 2:13–22, also warn against the dangers of pride.

According to the LDS Church, as a person gets older, the desire to sin ought to lessen. One teacher's manual says,

> Explain that the last step in repentance is striving to keep all the commandments of God (see D&C 1:32). Repentance is a process that we will have to use throughout our lives, but as we become more perfect in keeping the commandments, we will do less for which we need to repent. (*Preparing for Exaltation Teacher's Manual*, 65.)

Of course, maturity in the faith is important, but the desire to sin is not something that just goes away with time. Consider what the apostle Paul said in Romans 7:15, 18–20:

> For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. (ESV)

Some, like Kimball, have insisted that the "second estate," or this mortality, is the time to accomplish all that needs to be done. "This Life Is the Time," Kimball titled chapter 1 in *The Miracle of Forgiveness*. In a section titled "Dangers of Delay," he warned church members:

> Because men are prone to postpone action and ignore directions, the Lord has repeatedly given strict injunctions and issued solemn warnings. . . . And the burden of the prophetic warning has been that the time to act is now, in this mortal life. One cannot with impunity delay his compliance with God's commandments. (*The Miracle of Forgiveness*, 286)

Joseph Fielding Smith taught, "This life is the most vital period in our eternal existence." (*Book of Mormon Teacher Manual: Religion 121–122,* 109. See also Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* 1:69.) Kimball warned, "This earth life is the time to repent. We cannot afford to take any chances of dying an enemy to God."(*The Miracle of Forgiveness*, 15). Kimball especially criticized his people for procrastination:

> There are . . . many members of the Church who are lax and careless and who continually procrastinate. They live the gospel casually but not devoutly. They have complied with some requirements but are not valiant. They do no major crime but merely fail to do the things required—things like paying tithing, living the Word of Wisdom, having family prayers, fasting, attending meetings, service. . . . The Lord will not translate one's good hopes and desires and intentions into works. Each of us must do that for himself. (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball*, 8).

The list of requirements is many. When it comes to tithing, for example, the Mormon Church has emphasized its necessity in relation to repentance and forgiveness. President Kimball gave a First Presidency message in October 1982 where he said,

> *If one neglects his tithing, misses his meetings, breaks the Sabbath, or fails in his prayers and other responsibilities, he is not completely repentant. The Lord knows, as do we, the degree of full and sufficient compliance we make with these fundamental aspects of the law of repentance, which is really God's law of progress and fulfillment. ("The Gospel of Repentance," Ensign, October 1982, 5).*

Referring to Kimball's final point in his "five essential elements of repentance" given in T*he Miracle of Forgiveness*, Apostle Richard G. Scott told a general conference audience,

> *Full obedience brings the complete power of the gospel into your life with strength to focus on the abandonment of specific sins. It includes things you might not initially consider part of repentance, such as attending meetings, paying tithing, giving service, and forgiving others. The Lord said:"He that repents and does the commands of the Lord shall be forgiven."("Finding Forgiveness," Ensign, May 1995, 76. Scott was quoting D&C 1:32).*

Since tithing appears to be one of the essential ingredients for forgiveness, one must wonder what the Mormon should do with the following words from Mormon 8:32: "Yea, it shall come in a day when there shall be churches built up that shall say: Come unto me, and for your money you shall be forgiven of your sins."

Another Book of Mormon passage, 1 Nephi 3:7, affirms that God gives no commandments to the "children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them." If this is true, then we must assume that those Mormons who fail to repent of all of their sins are guilty of squandering their mortal opportunity and indeed have procrastinated their repentance. This is a perilous situation since, as Kimball stated, "Incomplete repentance never brought complete forgiveness."(*The Miracle of Forgiveness*, 212).

The faithful Latter-day Saint is continually admonished to "keep trying" to obey all of the laws of God. If it is impossible to be perfect, then it is wrong for the LDS Church to demand complete obedience to all of the laws of God in order to receive exaltation. It would be better and even more honest for Mormons to merely promise to do their best to keep God's commands. BYU professor Stephen E. Robinson admits that the phrase "keeping the commandments" is a troublesome expression for Mormons, "particularly when they talk to non-Latter-day Saints." (*Believing Christ*, 45). In an attempt to clarify what he feels is the LDS position, he writes:

We generally say "keeping the commandments" when what we really mean is "trying real hard to keep the commandments and succeeding most of the time." Defined in this way, the phrase describes the attempts at obedience that the new covenant requires as our token of "good faith." Defined in this way, "keeping the commandments" is both possible and necessary; that is, trying to keep the commandments, doing the best we can at it, is a requirement of the gospel covenant, even though succeeding right now in keeping all of the commandments all of the time is not. (Ibid., 45–46).

Apostle Russell M. Nelson said trying *was* good enough. He stated, "Meanwhile, brothers and sisters, let us *do the best we can* and *try* to improve each day. (*Ensign* (November 1995): 88; emphasis added). This opinion flatly contradicts Kimball's assessment:

> It is normal for children to try. They fall and get up numerous times before they can be certain of their footing. But adults, who have gone through these learning periods, must determine what they will do, then proceed to do it. To "try" is weak. To "do the best I can" is not strong. We must always do better than we can. (*The Miracle of Forgiveness*, 165. This section was quoted in "Q&A: Questions and Answers" in the church magazine *New Era*, April 1995, 17).

This comment takes on a much stronger meaning when Kimball gives a hypothetical dialogue between an army officer and a soldier to show that trying is "not sufficient":

> An army officer called a soldier to him and ordered him to take a message to another officer. The soldier saluted and said, "I'll try, sir! I'll try!" To this the officer responded: "I don't want you to try, I want you to deliver this message." The soldier, somewhat embarrassed, now replied: "I'll do the best I can, sir." At this the officer, now disgusted, rejoined with some vigor: "I don't want you to try and I don't want you to 'do the best you can.' I want you to deliver this message." Now the young soldier, straightening to his full height, approached the matter magnificently, as he thought, when he saluted again and said: "I'll do it or die, sir." To this the now irate officer responded: "I don't want you to die, and I don't want you merely to do the best you can, and I don't want you to try. Now, the request is a reasonable one; the message is important; the distance is not far; you are able-bodied; you can do what I have ordered. Now get out of here and accomplish your mission." (Ibid., 164).

Kimball's kick-in-the-tail pep talk hardly allows for failure. When Mormons insist they are trying, it is usually in the context of failing to succeed. Kimball's analogy does not allow for this possibility. There certainly appears to be some theological double-talk among LDS leaders when it comes to this subject. On the one hand, members are told that they must "be ye perfect," but on the other, they are told they can never achieve perfection. Some leaders say complete obedience is the requirement for exaltation, while others declare that partial obedience will suffice. At one point they are told trying is *insufficient,* but then they are taught that trying *is satisfactory,* as this manual states "if we will strive…we shall qualify to be more than members of record." How are Mormons to decipher the true teaching? And how can they know when they have done enough?

I believe this chapter on repentance, as reciting the comments from Benson, did not give a complete picture of what is really required in Mormonism for complete repentance (and hence, forgiveness). Thus, when this chapter ends by saying, "My prayer is that we may all win that promise for ourselves," it must be understood that it would truly take a miracle according to the system wrought by traditional and authoritative Mormonism.

Chapter 6: Jesus Christ, Our Savior and Redeemer

"We declare the divinity of Jesus Christ. We look to Him as the only source of our salvation."

From the Life of Ezra Taft Benson

During his apostolic ministry as a special witness of Jesus Christ, President Benson frequently bore testimony of the Savior. Acknowledging that "the question is sometimes asked, 'Are Mormons Christians?'" he testified:

"We declare the divinity of Jesus Christ. We look to Him as the only source of our salvation. We strive to live His teachings, and we look forward to the time that He shall come again on this earth to rule and reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. In the words of a Book of Mormon prophet, we say … , 'There [is] no other name given nor any other way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent' (Mosiah 3:17)."

President Benson's declarations of the divinity of Jesus Christ were often linked to the Book of Mormon. "Through the Book of Mormon God has provided for our day tangible evidence that Jesus is the Christ," he said. He taught that the Book of Mormon's "major mission" is to convince people of this truth. "Over one-half of all the verses in the Book of Mormon refer to our Lord," he noted. "He is given over one hundred different names in the Book of Mormon. Those names have a particular significance in describing His divine nature."

It is not a surprise that Benson's manual covers the life of Christ. Every "Teachings of Presidents of the Church" manual does. Yet we must ask, does Jesus as described by Benson and taught in Mormonism compared to the historical Jesus of the Bible? I believe the answer is an unqualified *no*.

Despite the claim of people who accept that all religions have their own unique paths to God—a system known as Universalism or Pluralism—a belief in a false Jesus is just as dangerous as no Jesus at all because faith is only as good as the object in which it is placed. Indeed, James 2:19 shows that an intellectual belief in God is not the same as true faith. Paul certainly admonished the Corinthians for accepting a false version of Christ when he said in 2 Corinthians 11:4, "For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough" (ESV). The apostle added in Galatians 1:6–9:

> I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are

> some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

Heretical views of Christ have plagued Christianity since its beginning. Because of the importance of the belief in Jesus, early heresies (false teachings) needed to be dealt with by the young church. Christian scholar Harold O. J. Brown wrote,

> To a degree that is hard for twentieth-century people to grasp, the early church believed that it was absolutely vital to know and accept some very specific statements about the nature and attributes of God and his Son Jesus Christ (*Heresies: The Image of Christ in the Mirror of Heresy and Orthodoxy from the Apostles to the Present*, 21).

One more thing I want to add, based on Benson's reference to the Book of Mormon. Yes, this unique LDS scripture does speak about Jesus, including his visit to the Americas sometime after he ascended into heaven (Acts 1). But as I will show in this review, I think the view of Jesus in the Book of Mormon is a very "Protestantized" version. In this most important sacred scripture the reader will not see a Savior who:

- was created and was the spirit brother of Lucifer
- was born through a relationship between Heavenly Father and one of God's spirit wives;
- needed to be obedient to become humanity's lifeline;
- was a lesser god than Heavenly Father;

Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson

Because of His infinite love for us, Jesus Christ redeemed us from physical and spiritual death.

No other single influence has had so great an impact on this earth as the life of Jesus the Christ. We cannot conceive of our lives without His teachings. Without Him we would be lost in a mirage of beliefs and worships born in fear and darkness where the sensual and materialistic hold sway. We are far short of the goal He set for us, but we must never lose sight of it, nor must we forget that our great climb toward the light, toward perfection, would not be possible except for His teaching, His life, His death, and His resurrection.

These are nice words. They sound good, especially to someone who wants Mormonism to be true. But what the manual fails to show is that Jesus is, according to Mormonism, the first-born son of God the Father in the First Estate, called the preexistence. This view is completely contrary to what is taught in the Bible. According to the LDS view, Lucifer was another son of "Heavenly Father" who wanted to become the savior of the world. One of the more offensive

attributes designated to the Jesus of Mormonism is the claim that He is the spirit-brother of Lucifer. Seventy Milton R. Hunter wrote,

> The appointment of Jesus to be the Savior of the world was contested by one of the other sons of God. He was called Lucifer, son of the morning. Haughty, ambitious, and covetous of power and glory, this spirit-brother of Jesus desperately tried to become the Savior of mankind. (*The Gospel through the Ages*, 15).

Mormon educator Jess L. Christensen said:

> On first hearing, the doctrine that Lucifer and our Lord, Jesus Christ, are brothers may seem surprising to some, especially to those unacquainted with latter-day revelations. But both the scriptures and the prophets affirm that Jesus Christ and Lucifer are indeed offspring of our Heavenly Father and, therefore, spirit brothers. . . . Both Jesus and Lucifer were strong leaders with great knowledge and influence. But as the First-born of the Father, Jesus was Lucifer's older brother (*A Sure Foundation: Answers to Difficult Gospel Questions*, 223–24. Ellipsis mine).

Ironically, the same passages of the Bible that expound on Christ's eternal deity also show that Lucifer could not be the brother of Christ. John 1:1–3 says that "all things" (including Lucifer) were made by Jesus, who was, is, and always will be God. Colossians 1:15, the one biblical verse used by Christensen, says, "He (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature." However, this has nothing to do with Jesus and Satan being brothers.

In fact, it emphatically proclaims Christ's deity ("image of the invisible God"). Verses 16–17 show that Christ created all things and that He is before all things, holding them together. Just as a person can look into the mirror to see a reflection, so too is Jesus the exact image of God.

BYU professor Charles R. Harrell refutes the commonly held LDS notion, writing, "Paul is not referring to premortal spirit birth, but to Christ becoming the firstborn in attaining God's glory, a status which would subsequently be attained by 'many brethren' (i.e., disciples)" ("*This is My Doctrine": The Development of Mormon Theology*, 168). Lest there be confusion over the term firstborn, it should be pointed out that the Greek word used is not *protoktistos* (meaning first created) but rather *prototokos* (meaning firstborn).

Both Hebrews 1:3 and 2 Corinthians 4:4 point out that Christ is the exact representation of God. Referring to Colossians 1, Harrell writes on page 171 that this is "an unmistakable reference to his [Jesus's] preeminence in the resurrection from the dead." He adds that "in the New Testament Christ is the firstborn in the sense of (1) being prior to and the source of all creation; (2) being the first to receive exaltation and glory, and (3) being the first to rise from the dead, 'that in all things he might have the preeminence' (Col. 1:18)." The Bible adamantly declares Lucifer to be

a creation of Jesus and not the brother of Jesus. Besides, Jesus and Satan are as opposite as light and darkness. Satan merely tries to imitate an angel of light in order to fool as many people as possible (2 Cor. 11:14).

Referring to humanity's premortal existence in heaven, Apostle Robert D. Hales taught that, while we can't remember this time,

> we probably sat in meetings much like this, where the Father's plan for us was explained. We cannot remember that Lucifer, a son of God the Father, a brother of Jesus Christ, rebelled against God's plan and, in his rebellion, promised he would bring us all back home. But Lucifer would have denied us our free agency, the freedom to make decisions. We cannot remember that his plan was not accepted by us because, without choice, there would not have been a purpose for coming to this mortal probation. We would not have had opposition or repentance. We would not have learned obedience. (*Ensign*, May 1990, p. 39).

A church manual says, "After hearing both sons speak, Heavenly Father said, 'I will send the first' (Abraham 3:27)" (*Gospel Principles*, 15). Unfortunately, one third of the spirits chose Lucifer's plan that denied free choice; everyone who would end up receiving bodies by being born on the earth apparently chose Jesus. Thus,

> In this great rebellion, Satan and all the spirits who followed him were sent away from the presence of God and cast down from heaven. A third part of the hosts of heaven were punished for following Satan (see D&C 29:36). They were denied the right to receive mortal bodies. Because we are here on earth and have mortal bodies, we know that we chose to follow Jesus Christ and our Heavenly Father. . . . In our premortal life, we chose to follow Jesus Christ and accept God's plan (*Gospel Principles*, 16, 17. Ellipsis ours).

Such a view of Jesus has never been held by the historic Christian church.

To have any measure of appreciation and gratitude for what [Jesus Christ] accomplished in our behalf, we must remember these vital truths:

Jesus came to earth to do our Father's will.

He came with a foreknowledge that He would bear the burden of the sins of us all.

He knew he would be lifted up on the cross.

He was born to be the Savior and Redeemer of all mankind.

He was able to accomplish His mission because He was the Son of God and He possessed the power of God.

He was willing to accomplish His mission because He loves us.

No mortal being had the power or capability to redeem all other mortals from their lost and fallen condition, nor could any other voluntarily forfeit his life and thereby bring to pass a universal resurrection for all other mortals.

Only Jesus Christ was able and willing to accomplish such a redeeming act of love.

Jesus Christ … came to this earth at a fore-appointed time through a royal birthright that preserved His godhood. Combined in His nature were the human attributes of His mortal mother and the divine attributes and powers of His Eternal Father.

His unique heredity made Him heir to the honored title—The Only Begotten Son of God in the flesh. As the Son of God, He inherited powers and intelligence which no human ever had before or since. He was literally Immanuel, which means "God with us." (See Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23.)

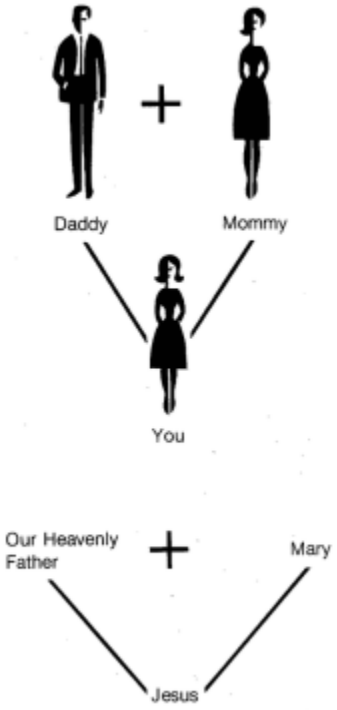
Again, without critical analysis, this teaching also seems to be in line with basic Christian theology. However, we must understand what Benson (and the Mormon religion) means by saying "The Only Begotten Son of God in the flesh." Is it the same as what is taught in the Bible?

Since the beginning, Christ's followers have believed that their Savior was born as a result of a miraculous conception, as attested in Matthew 1:18. Mormon leaders have insisted in a belief of the virgin birth, yet they give a description far removed from that held by Christians throughout the centuries. An instructor's guide explains how Mormonism disagrees with the traditional doctrine:

> The teacher might wish to point out that many people in the Christian world want to believe in Jesus, but only as a great human being, only as a great man. They feel uncomfortable about the concept of the miraculous, virgin birth. Yet if this is denied, all of the Atonement must be rejected as well. It was the inheritance that came from a mortal mother and a divine Father that made the Atonement possible (*The Life and Teachings of Jesus and His Apostles Instructor's Guide Religion 211-212*, 14).

What exactly does the leadership mean when it refers to a "mortal mother and a divine Father"? Consider what the 1972 *Family Home Evening Manual* quoted from tenth president Joseph Fielding Smith on pages 125-126:

Now, we are told in scriptures that Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God in the flesh. Well, now for the benefit of the older ones, how are children begotten? I answer just as Jesus Christ was begotten of his father. . . . Jesus is the only person who had our Heavenly Father as the father of his body.



The manual included a diagram on page 126 (see left) that was made for children of LDS parents to better understand what Smith was saying. "Daddy + Mommy = You," it says, depicting a man, woman, and child. In the same way, "Our Heavenly Father + Mary = Jesus," with no drawings to depict any of the three. Yet the concept is clearly understood. A physical relationship took place in Mormonism's version of the Virgin Birth, contrary to what is taught in Matthew 1:18 that said the Holy Ghost "overshadowed" Mary.

Consider other quotes by LDS leaders:

- "To condescend is literally to go down among. The condescension of God lies in the fact that he, an exalted Being, steps down from his eternal throne to become the Father of a mortal Son, a Son born 'after the manner of the flesh'" (*Book of Mormon Seminary Student Study Guide*, 22. See also Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah* 1:314 as well as McConkie and Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* 1:78).
- "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints proclaims that Jesus Christ is the Son of God in the most literal sense. The body in which He performed His mission in the flesh was sired by that same Holy Being we worship as God, our Eternal Father. Jesus was not

> the son of Joseph, nor was He begotten by the Holy Ghost" (*Church News*, 18 December 2004, 16; *Ensign*, April 1997, p. 15).

Note: This quote was taken from Ezra Taft Benson, as recorded on page 7 of Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson. It comes in direct contradiction of Matthew 1:18, which says that the Holy Ghost did "beget" Jesus. This quote is left out of Benson's church manual.

- "He is the Son of God, literally, actually, as men are the sons of mortal parents" (*What the Mormons Think of Christ*, a pamphlet published by the LDS Church, p. 44).
- "Thus, God the Father became the literal father of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only person on earth to be born of a mortal mother and an immortal father" (*Gospel Principles*, p. 53. Also see *Ensign,* December 2013, p. 7).
- "Our Savior, Jesus Christ, is called the Only Begotten Son because He is the only person on earth to be born of a mortal mother and an immortal Father . . . Modern prophets have testified: [Jesus Christ] was . . . the Only Begotten Son in the flesh, the Redeemer of the world" ("The Divine Mission of Jesus Christ: The Only Begotten Son," *Ensign*, December 2013, p. 7. Brackets and ellipses in original).

Since Mormonism teaches that Mary did not have sexual relations with a *mortal* man but instead was impregnated by an *immortal* man (Elohim), many Latter-day Saints have no qualms about using this phrase. Harrell describes the difficulties with this position when he writes:

> Of course, for Latter-day Saints who hold the belief that Christ was literally conceived by God the Father, the idea of a virgin birth becomes a bit problematic as it would presumably change Mary's status as a virgin. Bruce R. McConkie gives his resolution to this conundrum by redefining "virgin" to mean a woman who has not known a *mortal* man: "She conceived and brought forth her Firstborn Son while yet a virgin because the Father of that child was an immortal personage" (*"This Is My Doctrine": The Development of Mormon Theology*, 167).

When one considers how Mormonism teaches that every human born on earth is a literal spiritual child of God, the above quotes become even more disconcerting. Indeed, the Mormon version of the Virgin Birth is a very blasphemous concept when its meaning is grasped. After all, this is what it is saying: Heavenly Father (with a body of flesh and bones, parts and passion) literally had relations with Mary (his spiritual daughter from Premortality) in order to incarnate Jesus! If LDS leaders are telling the truth, then we have no other recourse than to assume that the Jesus of Mormonism was created through an incestuous relationship. A Christian who grasps this intended meaning will shudder at the thought of such a teaching.

Even though He was God's Son sent to earth, the divine plan of the Father required that Jesus be subjected to all the difficulties and tribulations of mortality. Thus He became subject to "temptations, … hunger, thirst, and fatigue." (Mosiah 3:7.)

Jesus was truly God in the flesh, so Christians are able to say that He is 100% God and 100% man. As Philippians 2:5-11 states:

> 5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:6 Who,
> being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his
> own advantage;
>
> 7 rather, he made himself nothing
> by taking the very nature of a servant,
> being made in human likeness.
> 8 And being found in appearance as a man,
> he humbled himself
> by becoming obedient to death—
> even death on a cross!
>
> 9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above
> every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth
> and under the earth, 11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the
> glory of God the Father.

To qualify as the Redeemer of all our Father's children, Jesus had to be perfectly obedient to all the laws of God. Because He subjected Himself to the will of the Father, He grew "from grace to grace, until he received a fulness" of the Father's power. Thus He had "all power, both in heaven and on earth." (D&C 93:13, 17.)

Here are a few other quotes to provide to show that Benson was not alone in his assessment of Jesus qualifying to become the Savior:

- "Jesus became a God and reached His great state of understanding through consistent effort and continuous obedience to all the Gospel truths and universal laws" (Milton R. Hunter, *The Gospel Through the Ages*, p. 51).
- "Christ attained Godhood while yet in pre-existence, he too stood as a God to the other spirits, but this relationship was not the same one of personal parenthood that prevailed between the Father and his offspring" (Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 1966, p. 323).
- "*Christ worked out his own salvation by worshipping the Father.* After the Firstborn of the Father, while yet a spirit being, had gained power and intelligence that made him like

> unto God; after he had become, under the Father, the Creator of worlds without number; after he had reigned on the throne of eternal power as the Lord Omnipotent-after all this he yet had to gain a mortal and then an immortal body" (*Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie*, 1966, p. 61. Italics in original).

- "That Jesus attained eternal perfection following his resurrection is confirmed in the Book of Mormon. It records the visit of the resurrected Lord to the people of ancient America. There he repeated the important injunction previously cited but with one very significant addition. He said, 'I would that ye should be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect.' This time he listed himself along with his Father as a perfected personage. Previously he had not" (Russell M. Nelson, "Perfection Pending," *Ensign*, November 1995, p. 87).

Just like the quotes regarding the Virgin Birth, these ought to be considered quite blasphemous to anyone who takes the Bible seriously. If you are LDS, please understand why. As Christians, we believe that Jesus always *was* God, *is* God, and always *will be* God. There is no having "to be perfectly obedient to all the laws of God." As if Jesus had to attain His status as God! The Bible teaches that He never lost a "fullness" of being God. Qualifying to become the "Redeemer" is certainly not part of the vocabulary Christians would have.

As far as "all our Father's children," we have previously stated in these reviews that premortality is a doctrine Mormonism shares only with heretics. Jesus and Lucifer are *not* spirit brothers. Nor are we spirit brothers and sisters of Jesus.

Because [Jesus] was God—even the Son of God—He could carry the weight and burden of other men's sins on Himself. Isaiah prophesied [of] our Savior's willingness to do this in these words: "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: … he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." (Isa. 53:4–5.)

According to Mormonism, Jesus is "a" god (small g). The differences are admitted by LDS leaders. For example fifteenth president Gordon B. Hinckley exclaimed,

> In bearing testimony of Jesus Christ, President Hinckley spoke of those outside the Church who say Latter-day Saints "do not believe in the traditional Christ." "No, I don't. The traditional Christ of whom they speak is not the Christ of whom I speak. For the Christ of whom I speak has been revealed in this the Dispensation of the Fulness of Times. He together with His Father, appeared to the boy Joseph Smith in the year 1820, and when Joseph left the grove that day, he knew more of the nature of God than all the learned ministers of the gospel of the ages" ("Crown of Gospel is Upon Our Heads," *Church News*, June 20, 1998, p. 7).

At a general conference talk a few years later, Hinckley showed that he hadn't changed his mind when he stated,

> As a church we have critics, many of them. They say we do not believe in the traditional Christ of Christianity. There is some substance to what they say ("We look to Christ," *Ensign,* May 2002, p. 90).

That holy, unselfish act of voluntarily taking on Himself the sins of all other men is the Atonement.

The stripes of Jesus don't "heal" anyone in Mormonism, as the previous quote from Isaiah says. Rather, they merely pave the way for Latter-day Saints to walk through the door, but everything else rests on their own backs. D&C 138:4 says, "That through his atonement, and by obedience to the principles of the gospel, mankind might be saved."

Henry B. Eyring, a member of the First Presidency, agreed that Jesus taking on others' sins did not solve the problem for humanity. He told a general conference crowd,

> It is hard to know when we have done enough for the Atonement to change our natures and so qualify us for eternal life ("This Day," *Ensign,* May 2007, p. 90).

A much different picture is evident in biblical Christianity.

How One could bear the sins for all is beyond the comprehension of mortal man. But this I know: He did take on Himself the sins of all and did so out of His infinite love for each of us. He has said: "For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; … which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink." (D&C 19:16, 18.)

All of the sins of mankind are *not* paid through the atonement. In fact, two LDS apostles said that it is necessary for everyone to become a Mormon as well as deny oneself and participate in the temple ordinances. These are requirements in order to have full access to the "Atonement." They said,

> "Jesus Christ atoned for the sins of all who will repent and be baptized through the power of the holy Priesthood" (Robert D. Hales, "Blessings of the Priesthood," *Ensign,* November 1995, p. 33).

> "Thanks to the Atonement, the gift of immortality is *unconditional*. The greater gift of eternal life, however, is *conditional*. In order to qualify, one must deny oneself of

> ungodliness and honor the ordinances and covenants of the temple" (Russell M. Nelson, "Divine Love," *Ensign*, February 2003, p. 24, Italics in original).

In spite of that excruciating ordeal, He took the cup and drank. He suffered the pains of all men so we would not have to suffer. He endured the humiliation and insults of His persecutors without complaint or retaliation. He bore the flogging and then the ignominy of the brutal execution—the cross. In Gethsemane and on Calvary, [Jesus] worked out the infinite and eternal atonement. It was the greatest single act of love in recorded history. Then followed His death and resurrection.

The cross does not play a central role in LDS teaching when the Atonement is considered. Benson explained elsewhere:

> It was in Gethsemane that Jesus took on Himself the sins of the world, in Gethsemane that His pain was equivalent to the cumulative burden of all men, in Gethsemane that He descended below all things so that all could repent and come to Him (*Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson*, p.14).

Over the years few positive statements have been made about the cross. For example, Apostle Bruce R. McConkie wrote,

> The sectarian world falsely suppose that the climax of his torture and suffering was on the cross (Matt. 27:26-50; Mark 15:1-38; Luke 23:1-46; John 18; 19:1-18) — a view which they keep ever before them by the constant use of the cross as a religious symbol. The fact is that intense and severe as the suffering was on the cross, yet the great pains were endured in the Garden of Gethsemane. (Matt. 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-46; John 18:1.) It was there that he trembled because of pain, bled at every pore, and suffered both in body and in spirit, and would that he "might not drink the bitter cup." (D. & C. 19:15-19; Mosiah 3:7.) It was there he underwent his greatest suffering for men, taking upon himself, as he did, their sins on conditions of repentance. (D. & C. 18:10-15.) (Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 1966, p. 555).

McConkie also taught:

> Where and under what circumstances was the atoning sacrifice of the Son of God made? Was it on the Cross of Calvary or in the Garden of Gethsemane? It is to the Cross of Christ that most Christians look when centering their attention upon the infinite and eternal atonement. And certainly the sacrifice of our Lord was completed when he was lifted up by men; also, that part of his life and suffering is more dramatic and, perhaps, more soul stirring. But in reality the pain and suffering, the triumph and grandeur, of the

> atonement took place primarily in Gethsemane (*Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* 1:774).

In addition, he stated,

> And the most transcendent event in his entire eternal existence, the most glorious single happening from creation's dawn to eternity's endless continuance, the crowning work of his infinite goodness—such took place in a garden called Gethsemane, outside a city called Jerusalem, when he, tabernacled in the flesh, bore the weight of the sins of all those who believe in his name and obey his gospel (*The Promised Messiah: The First Coming of Christ*, p. 2).

Even in recent years Gethsemane continues to be emphasized, not the cross. Apostle Russell M. Nelson explained,

> Because of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, all mankind, even as many as will, shall be redeemed. The Savior began shedding His blood for all mankind, not on the cross but in the Garden of Gethsemane. There He took upon Himself the weight of the sins of all who would ever live. Under that heavy load, He bled at every pore ("The Message: His Mission and Ministry," *New Era* magazine, December 1999, pp. 4, 6).

Apostle M. Russell Ballard added,

> Thankfully, Jesus Christ courageously fulfilled this sacrifice in ancient Jerusalem. There in the quiet isolation of the Garden of Gethsemane, He knelt among the gnarled olive trees, and in some incredible way that none of us can fully comprehend, the Savior took upon Himself the sins of the world ("The Atonement and the Value of One Soul," *Ensign* (Conference Edition), May 2004, p. 85).

A church manual makes the cross an afterthought:

> In Gethsemane, Jesus suffered for the sins of all mankind, as if they were His own. His suffering for all these sins were greater than any of us can understand. . . . On the cross, He finished suffering the penalty for Adam's disobedience and for our own sins (*Gospel Fundamentals*, 2002, p. 57. Ellipses mine).

While Gethsemane certainly was a place of torment, there cannot be an effective sacrifice without the victim's death. The Bible states:

- Leviticus 17:11: "For the life of the flesh [is] in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it [is] the blood [that] maketh an atonement for the soul."

- Romans 4:25: "He [Jesus] was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification."
- Colossians 2:14: ". . . having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross."
- Hebrews 9:28a: ". . . so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many."
- Hebrews 10:11-14: "Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy."

Thus He became our Redeemer—redeeming all of us from physical death, and redeeming those of us from spiritual death who will obey the laws and ordinances of the gospel.

There are two types of salvation, as explained by Apostle James Talmage:

> This twofold effect of the atonement is implied in the article of our faith now under consideration. The first effect is to secure to all mankind alike, exemption from the penalty of the fall, thus providing a plan of *General Salvation.* The second effect is to open a way for *Individual Salvation* whereby mankind may secure remission of personal sins. As these sins are the result of individual acts it is just that forgiveness for them should be conditioned on individual compliance with prescribed requirements—"obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel" (*Articles of Faith*, 1984, pp. 78-79. Italics in original).

Thus, as Benson has put it, general salvation is resurrection from the dead. Individual salvation is exaltation, obeying all the commandments to attain eternal life.

We may never understand nor comprehend in mortality how He accomplished what He did, but we must not fail to understand why He did what He did.

Everything He did was prompted by His unselfish, infinite love for us.

Christians agree that Jesus has an "unselfish, infinite love for us," and yet this love is not based on any good works. First John 3:1 says, "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him." Verses 9 and 10 of chapter 4 says, "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. First John 5:13 adds, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." Eternal life is

guaranteed by the One who can be trusted because He never lies nor deceives—His Word is good.

"No other single influence has had so great an impact on this earth as the life of Jesus the Christ."

Jesus Christ came forth from the tomb, and He lives today as a resurrected being.

Jesus is more than just a "resurrected being." He is God in the flesh and sits on the right hand of God the Father, equal in power and authority. Unfortunately, the Mormon Church includes Jesus Christ in its name but teaches another Jesus (2 Cor. 11:4). One way this takes place is by diminishing who Jesus is. For example, consider how Jesus—as with everyone born onto this earth—lost His ability to remember anything from the preexistence and had to "progress."

Jay E. Jensen, a member of the Presidency of the Seventy, explained, "When the Lord came to earth, He had a veil of forgetfulness placed over His mind, as we do, but He, like us, progressed from grace to grace" (*Ensign,* January 2011, p. 42). One LDS resource traces the teaching back to Mormonism's founder Joseph Smith:

> As Joseph Smith taught, Jesus was born with a veil of forgetfulness common to all who are born to earth, but even as a child he had all the intelligence necessary to enable him to govern the kingdom of the Jews (see source under Basic Library), because he overcame the veil and came into communication with his Heavenly Father (*The Life and Teachings of Jesus and His Apostles Instructor's Guide Religion 211-212*, 13).

Jesus became a god, according to Milton R. Hunter, "through consistent effort and continuous obedience to all the Gospel truths and universal laws." That effort, Hunter continues, included Jesus' own baptism:

> Although John recognized Jesus as a perfect man, the Master made it clear that it was absolutely necessary for even the Son of God to be baptized. He—like the least of us—must obey every law of the Gospel if He was to receive all the blessings predicated on obedience. (*The Gospel through the Ages,* 200).

This idea that Jesus was under obligation of the law has been taught by a number of leaders. President Joseph F. Smith said,

> Even Christ himself was not perfect at first; he received not a fulness at first, but he received grace for grace, and he continued to receive more and more until he received a fullness (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith*, 153. Also see Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, comp. John A. Widtsoe, 68).

Bruce R. McConkie claimed, "Jesus kept the commandments of his Father and thereby worked out his own salvation, and also set an example as to the way and the means whereby all men may be saved" (*The Mortal Messiah,* 4:434). McConkie's use of Philippians 2:12 ("work out your salvation") misses the meaning of the passage. Paul does not use this expression to mean "work *for* your salvation" as so many Mormons will insist. Rather, as the words literally read, it means that believers "should 'conduct' themselves in a manner worthy of their right standing before God at the day of Christ" (Frank Thielman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Philippians*, 138).

Apostle Russell M. Nelson said Jesus achieved His perfection only *after* His resurrection:

> That Jesus attained perfection *following* his resurrection is confirmed in the Book of Mormon. It records the visit of the resurrected Lord to the people of ancient America. There he repeated the important injunction previously cited, but with one very significant addition. He said, "I would that ye should be perfect *even as I,* or your Father who is in heaven is perfect" (3 Nephi 12:48). This time he listed himself along with his Father as a perfected personage. Previously, he had not (See Matt. 5:48) (*Ensign*, November 1995, p. 87, italics his).

It is difficult to understand why Jesus, who allegedly became a god before His mortality, would have to work out his own salvation. Such a comment also fails to take into account that only sinners need to be saved in the first place. To say Christ had to do anything to gain His own salvation should rightfully be considered blasphemous by anyone who holds the Bible dear. Problematic also is the fact that the Jesus of Mormonism is but one of many saviors. According to Brigham Young:

> Consequently every earth has its redeemer, and every earth has its tempter; and every earth, and the people thereof, in their turn and time, receive all that we receive, and pass through all the ordeals that we are passing through (*Journal of Discourses,* 14:71–72).

Young also taught:

> How many Gods there are, I do not know. But there never was a time when there were not Gods and worlds, and when men were not passing through the same ordeals that we are passing through. That course has been from all eternity, and it is and will be to all eternity (Ibid., 7:333).

If such comments were true, we could assume that there are literally millions of saviors on millions of worlds! Despite these false teachings, the Bible says that Jesus is God and has been from all eternity. John 1:1–2, 14 says:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. . . . And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth.

Christianity has historically taught that Jesus, as very God, took upon Himself the form of a man. This is not to say that at any time His deity was diminished in any degree after His physical appearance on earth (His incarnation). The doctrine of kenosis ("empty") as described in Phil 2:5-11 states that Jesus voluntarily gave up the exercise of those attributes while here on earth. Jesus was, and is, both divine and human: 100 percent God and 100 percent man. He was conceived through the agency of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:18–25; Luke 1:35);

He lived a sinless life while subjected to human temptations (John 5:19; Heb. 2:18; 4:15); He died a real death and rose again bodily from the dead to conquer sin (Rom. 5:6–10; 1 Cor. 15:3–4); He will return to judge all humanity (John 5:22); He sent the Holy Spirit to empower the believers (John 14–16; Acts 1:8); He can be prayed to (Acts 7:59). Although some Mormon leaders (including Joseph Fielding Smith in *Doctrines of Salvation,* 1:14) say prayers should only be offered to the Father, 3 Nephi 19:17ff in the Book of Mormon supports praying to Jesus. Finally, He is deserving all honor, love, faith, and worship, just as much as the Father (Matt. 10:37; John 5:23; 14:1; Heb. 1:6). At the same time, He shares attributes with the Father because Jesus is also God.

Unfortunately, there are many differences in the version of the Savior from what is taught by Benson and other leaders and what the Bible advocates.

The greatest events of history are those that affect the greatest number of people for the longest periods. By this standard, no event could be more important to individuals or nations than the resurrection of the Master.

The literal resurrection of every soul who has lived and died on earth is a certainty, and surely one should make careful preparation for this event. A glorious resurrection should be the goal of every man and woman, for resurrection will be a reality.

Nothing is more absolutely universal than the resurrection. Every living being will be resurrected. "As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." (1 Cor. 15:22.)

It is true that every soul will be resurrected: some will rise to life and an eternity with God, and others to a resurrection called "damnation" by the Bible. John 5:29 says, "And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation."

We must be valiant in our testimony of Jesus Christ.

The admission here is that the Atonement alone is not powerful enough on its own to forgive a person from his or her sins.

A most priceless blessing available to every member of the Church is a testimony of the divinity of Jesus Christ and His church. A testimony is one of the few possessions we may take with us when we leave this life.

To have a testimony of Jesus is to possess knowledge through the Holy Ghost of the divine mission of Jesus Christ.

A testimony of Jesus is to know the divine nature of our Lord's birth—that He is indeed the Only Begotten Son in the flesh.

A testimony of Jesus is to know that He was the promised Messiah and that while He sojourned among men He accomplished many mighty miracles.

A testimony of Jesus is to know that the laws which He prescribed as His doctrine are true and then to abide by these laws and ordinances.

To possess a testimony of Jesus is to know that He voluntarily took upon Himself the sins of all mankind in the Garden of Gethsemane, which caused Him to suffer in both body and spirit and to bleed from every pore. All this He did so that we would not have to suffer if we would repent. (See D&C 19:16, 18.)

To possess a testimony of Jesus is to know that He came forth triumphantly from the grave with a physical, resurrected body. And because He lives, so shall all mankind.

To possess a testimony of Jesus is to know that God the Father and Jesus Christ did indeed appear to the Prophet Joseph Smith to establish a new dispensation of His gospel so that salvation may be preached to all nations before He comes.

To possess a testimony of Jesus is to know that the Church, which He established in the meridian of time and restored in modern times is, as the Lord has declared, "the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth." (D&C 1:30.)

Having such a testimony is vital. But of even greater importance is being valiant in our testimony.

A testimony of Jesus means that we accept the divine mission of Jesus Christ, embrace His gospel, and do His works. It also means we accept the prophetic mission of Joseph Smith and his

successors and follow their counsel. As Jesus said, “Whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same.” (D&C 1:38.)

To the Christian, a “testimony of Jesus” is having the understanding that all of the person’s sins are no longer held in condemnation because there is complete forgiveness. Period. End of story.

Speaking of those who will eventually receive the blessings of the celestial kingdom, the Lord said to Joseph Smith:

“They are they who received the testimony of Jesus, and believed on his name and were baptized after the manner of his burial, being buried in the water in his name, and this according to the commandment which he has given.” (D&C 76:51.)

These are they who are valiant in their testimony of Jesus, who, as the Lord has declared, “overcome by faith, and are sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, which the Father sheds forth upon all those who are just and true.” (D&C 76:53.)

On the first Sunday of each month (fast and testimony), Mormons “testify” how they “know” that the Book of Mormon is true, how Joseph Smith is a true prophet, and how the (capital C) Church is led by a living prophet named (fill in the blank–currrently it’s Thomas S. Monson). When I have heard LDS testimonies, however, there is usually very little emphasis placed on Jesus; Smith and the other LDS leadership always seem to get more acclaim.

Notice too how a “testimony” consists of a person having valiance in the testimony. I have to be honest with you, the more powerful Christian testimonies I have heard come from those who were not very valiant in their lifestyle. Rather, they acknowledged their desperate need for a Savior. Nobody can be valiant in their testimony if it means doing what is impossible to accomplish (keeping all the commandments). It would seem to be impossible to qualify for the Celestial Kingdom, for the rules set by the Mormon Church are filled with legalism, too narrow and harsh for anyone to abide. For more on the Mormon testimony, click here.

Faith in Jesus Christ consists of relying completely on Him and following His teachings.

The fundamental principle of our religion is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Why is it expedient that we center our confidence, our hope, and our trust in one solitary figure? Why is faith in Him so necessary to peace of mind in this life and hope in the world to come?

Our answers to these questions determine whether we face the future with courage, hope, and optimism or with apprehension, anxiety, and pessimism.

My message and testimony is this: Only Jesus Christ is uniquely qualified to provide that hope, that confidence, and that strength we need to overcome the world and rise above our human failings. To do so, we must place our faith in Him and live by His laws and teachings. …

In Mormonism, faith isn't fulfilled merely by placing faith in Jesus alone. There is always an "and" somewhere in the mix. As always, it's grace *and* works, which is necessary for any shot at exaltation.

Unless we do His teachings, we do not demonstrate faith in Him.

I agree that we will know a tree by its fruit. But our works are proof of the salvation that has already taken place, not something we must do before we receive salvation. The gospel is pretty well summarized in this short article.

Think what a different world this would be if all mankind would do as He said: "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. … Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." (Matt. 22:37, 39.)

What then is the answer to the question "What is to be done concerning the problems and dilemmas that individuals, communities, and nations face today?" Here is His simple prescription:

"Believe in God; believe that he is, and that he created all things, both in heaven and in earth; believe that he has all wisdom, and all power, both in heaven and in earth; believe that man doth not comprehend all the things which the Lord can comprehend. …

"Believe that ye must repent of your sins and forsake them, and humble yourselves before God; and ask in sincerity of heart that he would forgive you; and now, if you believe all these things, see that ye do them." (Mosiah 4:9–10; italics added.)

The Book of Mormon is not accepted as scripture by Christians. There is no language in the Bible that says, sternly, "see that ye do them" as Mosiah states.

"Come ye after me" (Mark 1:17).

We are most blessed and joyful when we strive to be like Jesus Christ.

One of the purposes of this life is for us to be tested to see whether we "will do all things whatsoever the Lord" our God shall command us. (Abr. 3:25.) In short, we are to learn the will of the Lord and do it. We are to follow the model of Jesus Christ and be like Him.

The essential question of life should be the same one posed by Paul: "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" (Acts 9:6.) …

We need more men and women of Christ who will always remember Him, who will keep His commandments which He has given them. The greatest yardstick of success is to see how closely we can walk each moment in His steps.

Some … are willing to die for their faith, but they are not willing to fully live for it. Christ both lived and died for us. Through His atonement and by walking in His steps, we can gain the greatest gift of all—eternal life, which is that kind of life of the great Eternal One—our Father in Heaven.

There is a conundrum here. How can a gift be received when there is something that must be done in order to qualify for it? Imagine if a grandfather told his grandson, "Lad, I'd love to give you a gift. Here it is. Now, would you mow my grass?" If the gift was worth $50, perhaps two mowings will do the trick. Is that how a loving grandfather approaches the situation? No, a loving grandfather typically bestows the gift before the grandson could even think about mowing the grass. If something is a gift, then there is no earning it.

Yet this illustration is what Mormonism teaches! Doctrine and Covenants 25:15 says, "Keep my commandments continually, and a crown of righteousness thou shalt receive. And except thou do this, where I am you cannot come." While verse 15 is specifically spoken to Joseph's wife Emma, verse 16 adds "that this is my voice unto all. Amen." As Henry B. Eyring, a member of the First Presidency, put it, "To receive the gift of living with Him forever in families in the celestial kingdom, we must be able to live the laws of that kingdom (see D&C 88:22). He has given us commandments in this life to help us develop that capacity" (*Ensign*, June 2011, p. 4).

Over and over again, Mormon Church leaders have stated that, by itself, God's grace—though vital for the "atonement—cannot fully "save" people from their sins. An unattributed article in the *Ensign* magazine stated,

What do Latter-day Saints believe about grace? We believe that God's grace is what ultimately saves us; yet it does not save us without doing all that we can to live God's commandments and follow Jesus Christ's teachings. We do not believe salvation comes by simply confessing belief in Christ as our Savior. Faith, works, ordinances, and grace are all necessary (*Ensign,* March 2013, p. 21).

To make our point, consider these quotes from the church presidents themselves about the importance of obedience required to attain celestial glory:

- Wilford Woodruff: “If a man does right, is valiant in the testimony of Jesus Christ, obeys the gospel, and keeps his covenants, when he passes to the other side of the veil he has an entrance into the presence of God and the Lamb; having kept celestial law he enters into celestial glory, he is preserved by that law, and he participates in that glory through the endless ages of eternity. It pays any man under heaven to obey and be faithful to the law of God the few days he spends in the flesh” (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Wilford Woodruff*, p. 212).
- Joseph F. Smith: “Every blessing, privilege, glory, or exaltation is obtained only through obedience to the law upon which the same is promised. If we will abide the law, we shall receive the reward; but we can receive it on no other ground” (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith,* p. 153).
- Heber J. Grant: “If you want to know how to be saved, I can tell you; it is by keeping the commandments of God. No power on earth, no power beneath the earth, will ever prevent you or me or any Latter-day Saint from being saved, except ourselves. We are the architects of our own lives, not only of the lives here, but the lives to come in the eternity. We ourselves are able to perform every duty and obligation that God has required of men. No commandment was ever given to us but that God has given us the power to keep that commandment. If we fail, we, and we alone, are responsible for the failure, because God endows His servants, from the President of the Church down to the humblest member, with all the ability, all the knowledge, all the power that is necessary, faithfully, diligently, and properly to discharge every duty and every obligation that rests upon them, and we, and we alone, will have to answer if we fail in this regard” (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Heber J. Grant*, p. 38).
- George Albert Smith: “Being a member of the Church and holding the Priesthood will not get us anywhere unless we are worthy. The Lord has said that every blessing that we desire is predicated upon obedience to His commandments. We may deceive our neighbors, and we may deceive ourselves with the idea that we are going through all right, but unless we keep the commandments of our Heavenly Father, unless we bear worthily this holy Priesthood that is so precious, we will not find our place in the celestial kingdom” (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: George Albert Smith*, p. 53).
- Joseph Fielding Smith: “Through obedience to those commandments which are set forth in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and by continuance therein, we shall receive immortality, glory, eternal life, and dwell in the presence of God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, where we shall truly know them” (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Fielding Smith*, p. 237).
- Harold B. Lee: “The greatest message that one in this position could give to the membership of the Church is to keep the commandments of God, for therein lies the safety of the Church and the safety of the individual. Keep the commandments. There could be nothing that I could say that would be a more powerful or important message today” (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Harold B. Lee*, p. 35).

- Spencer W. Kimball: “The Savior came ‘to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man’ (Moses 1:39). His birth, death, and resurrection brought about the first. But we must join our efforts with him to bring about the second, to attain eternal life” (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball*, p. 29).
- Thomas S. Monson: “Don’t put your eternal life at risk. Keep the commandments of God” (*Ensign*, May 2010, p. 66).

While some Mormons don’t pretend to be perfect and claim to regularly repent, obeying just *some* of the commandments is not an option, according to Apostle Russell M. Nelson:

> Teach of faith to keep *all* the commandments of God, knowing that they are given to bless His children and bring them joy. Warn them that they will encounter people who pick which commandments they will keep and ignore others that they choose to break. I call this the cafeteria approach to obedience. This practice of picking and choosing will not work. It will lead to misery. To prepare to meet God, one keeps *all* of His commandments. It takes faith to obey them, and keeping His commandments will strengthen that faith (*Ensign*, May 2011, p. 34. Italics in original).

Bemoaning the fact that many Latter-day Saints don’t follow through on the promises they make every week, Joseph Fielding Smith said, “I wish we could get the members of the Church to understand more clearly the covenants they make when they partake of the sacrament at our sacrament meetings” (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Fielding Smith*, 100). As Apostle Robert D. Hales explained,

> Each week as we participate in the ordinance of the sacrament, we renew the promise of the Savior’s birth in our own lives. We take His name upon us, and we renew our covenant of obedience and our promise that we will always remember Him (*Ensign,* December 2013, p. 19).

In a talk titled “Obedience to Law is Liberty” at the April 2013 general conference, Apostle L. Tom Perry stated, “We must not pick and choose which commandments we think are important to keep but acknowledge all of God’s commandments” (*Ensign*, May 2013, p. 88). Apostle Dallin H. Oaks stated in that same general conference, “From modern revelation, unique to the restored gospel, we know that the commandment to seek perfection is part of God the Father’s plan for the salvation of His children” (Ibid., p. 98).

Seventy Bruce C. Hafen taught, “If we must give all that we have, then our giving only *almost* everything is not enough. If we *almost* keep the commandments, we *almost* receive the blessings” (*Ensign*, May 2004, p. 98. Italics in original).

Certainly official church manuals are in alignment with this attitude:

- “Latter-day Saints are Abraham’s seed of the latter days. Their exaltation or eternal life depends on their obedience to the covenants they have made and kept with God” (*Old Testament Student Manual: Genesis – 2 Samuel*, p. 62).
- “The Atonement of Jesus Christ assures each of us that we will be resurrected and live forever. But if we are to live forever with our families in Heavenly Father’s presence, we must do all that the Savior commands us to do. This includes being baptized and confirmed and receiving the ordinances of the temple” (*Gospel Principles*, p. 233).
- “Full obedience brings the complete power of the gospel into your life, including increased strength to overcome your weaknesses. This obedience includes actions you might not initially consider part of repentance, such as attending meetings, paying tithing, giving service, and forgiving others. The Lord promised, ‘He that repents and does the commandments of the Lord shall be forgiven’ (D&C 1:32)” (*True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference*, p. 135).
- **“**The Lord keeps His promises: ‘I, the Lord, am bound when ye do what I say; but when ye do not what I say, ye have no promise’ (D&C 82:10). We must do our part to qualify for the blessings (see D&C 130:20–22). We should also remember that God determines the *then* part according to His wisdom and not according to our expectations” (*Building an Eternal Marriage Teacher Manual: Religion 235*, p. v. Italics in original).
- “Have class members find and read Moroni 10:32. [It reads: “Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ; and if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in no wise deny the power of God.”] According to this verse, what must we do to ‘come unto Christ, and be perfected in him? (‘Deny [ourselves] of all ungodliness, and love God with all [our] might, mind and strength.’) Explain that ‘deny yourselves of all ungodliness’ means ‘give up your sins.’ We must strive to give up our sins and demonstrate that we love God with all our might, mind, and strength. If we do this throughout our lives, then Jesus Christ, through his Atonement, will help us become perfect” (*Preparing for Exaltation Teacher’s Manual*, p. 123. Brackets ours).
- “Receiving ordinances and keeping covenants are essential to Heavenly Father’s plan. The scriptures often refer to His people as a ‘covenant people.’ The Lord’s blessings exceed our mortal expectations. To live in the presence of our Heavenly Father, we must receive all of the necessary ordinances and keep all of the required covenants” (*The Gospel and the Productive Life Student Manual Religion 150*, p. 98).

There are implications in making covenants with God. In a straightforward address given in the *Ensign* magazine titled “Understanding our Covenants with God,” the leaders stated:

> A covenant is a two-way promise, the conditions of which are set by God. When we enter into a covenant with God, we promise to keep those conditions. He promises us certain

> blessings in return. When we receive these saving ordinances and keep the associated covenants, the Atonement of Jesus Christ becomes effective in our lives, and we can receive the great blessing God can give us—eternal life (see D&C 14:7). Because keeping our covenants is essential to our happiness now and to eventually receiving eternal life, it is important to understand what we have promised our Heavenly Father (*Ensign*, July 2012, p. 22).

Christ asked the question, "What manner of men ought [we] to be?" He then answered by saying we ought to be even as He is. (3 Ne. 27:27.)

That [person] is greatest and most blessed and joyful whose life most closely approaches the pattern of the Christ. This has nothing to do with earthly wealth, power, or prestige. The only true test of greatness, blessedness, joyfulness is how close a life can come to being like the Master, Jesus Christ. He is the right way, the full truth, and the abundant life.

The constant and most recurring question in our minds, touching every thought and deed of our lives, should be, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" (Acts 9:6.) The answer to that question comes only through the Light of Christ and the Holy Ghost. Fortunate are those who so live that their being is filled with both. …

The problem is, Christ was perfect. And we never will be. Of course, it's great to strive to be like Christ. Yet I completely disagree with the statement that "the only true test of greatness, blessedness, joyfulness is how close a life can come to being like the Master." No, the only true test is whether or not a person is forgiven of his or her sins. Jesus commended the publican, not the Pharisee. The heroes of the story of the Prodigal were the father and the son who had been lost, not the older son (who the Pharisees identified as representing them in Jesus' parable!). Jesus said in Matthew 11,

> Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Considering all that [Jesus Christ] has done and is doing for us, there is something that we might give Him in return.

This is an incredible statement. The way it's stated, it appears God is looking for a kickback. "Look at what I did for you," Jesus seems to say. "Now it's time for you to earn it back." For the Christian, good works are not done to repay God. Rather, they happen because of the understanding of what God has done first in our lives. A person receiving the ultimate gift will have an "attitude of gratitude." When someone has blessed you as richly as God has done for the believer through the forgiveness of sins, good works are the person's desire, not drudgery. After

all, Ephesians 2:10—which is placed right after verses 8 and 9 describing how Christians are saved by grace through faith and not by works because otherwise it leads to boasting—declares that believers are God's workmanship who were created by God to do good works. If we love Jesus and understand what we have been given, we will do what He commands (John 15:14). A great number of quotes from LDS leaders can be easily collected to show how Mormonism demands repayment for the debt so salvation can be earned. What a difference in perspectives!

Christ's great gift to us was His life and sacrifice. Should that not then be our small gift to Him—our lives and sacrifices, not only now but in the future?

"Small gift"? Mormonism requires more than "small gifts." It requires full repayment, making it an obligation, not a gift. As Joseph Fielding Smith said,

> The Savior was emphatic in his statement that all should come forth, the righteous to receive the blessings of his kingdom, and the wicked to be punished for their rebellion. We may be sure that in his mercy, the Lord will do for all the best that can be done. Some will merit the exaltation, others punishment until they have paid the 'uttermost farthing.' The exaltation will be given to those who have kept the commandments and have been faithful to every covenant and obligation upon which the exaltation rests. (*Answers to Gospel Questions* 3:88-89).

[Those who are] captained by Christ will be consumed in Christ. … Their will is swallowed up in His will. (See John 5:30.) They do always those things that please the Lord. (See John 8:29.) Not only would they die for the Lord, but, more important, they want to live for Him.

Enter their homes, and the pictures on their walls, the books on their shelves, the music in the air, their words and acts reveal them as Christians. They stand as witnesses of God at all times, and in all things, and in all places. (See Mosiah 18:9.) They have Christ on their minds, as they look unto Him in every thought. (See D&C 6:36.) They have Christ in their hearts as their affections are placed on Him forever. (See Alma 37:36.)

Almost every week they partake of the sacrament and witness anew to their Eternal Father that they are willing to take upon them the name of His Son, always remember Him, and keep His commandments. (See Moro. 4:3.)

Each week, Mormons across the globe promise to "always remember Him" as well as "keep His commandments." How many are they supposed to keep? According to Henry B. Eyring, every single one:

> Third, we promise as we take the sacrament to keep His commandments, all of them. President J. Reuben Clark Jr., as he pled—as he did many times—for unity in a general

> conference talk, warned us against being selective in what we will obey. He put it this way: 'The Lord has given us nothing that is useless or unnecessary. He has filled the Scriptures with the things which we should do in order that we may gain salvation.' President Clark went on: 'When we partake of the Sacrament we covenant to obey and keep his commandments. There are no exceptions. There are no distinctions, no differences' (in *Conference Report*, Apr. 1955, 10–11). President Clark taught that just as we repent of all sin, not just a single sin, we pledge to keep **all** the commandments. Hard as that sounds, it is uncomplicated. We simply submit to the authority of the Savior and promise to be obedient to whatever He commands (see Mosiah 3:19). It is our surrender to the authority of Jesus Christ which will allow us to be bound as families, as a Church, and as the children of our Heavenly Father ("That We All May Be One," *Ensign*, May 1998, pp. 67-68).

I differ with Eyring. It's much more complicated than what he lets on. Truly what is commanded is an impossible guinea pig wheel. The critter gets on it and runs as fast as it can, yet it still never gets anywhere! Try as hard as it might, getting to the finish line just can't be done. If Eyring were honest, he would admit that not even a general authority can say he's arrived because he still needs to repent each and every week. This is a clear sign that "all the commandments" have ***not*** been kept. And as I quoted above from D&C 58 and 82, there are consequences to not keeping all the commandments.

In Book of Mormon language, they "feast upon the words of Christ" (2 Ne. 32:3), "talk of Christ" (2 Ne. 25:26), "rejoice in Christ" (2 Ne. 25:26), "are made alive in Christ" (2 Ne. 25:25), and "glory in [their] Jesus" (see 2 Ne. 33:6). In short, they lose themselves in the Lord and find eternal life. (See Luke 17:33.)

If you are a Latter-day Saint, can you honestly say that you have "lost" yourself in the Lord and have found eternal life? If not, perhaps today is the day! See here for more information.

Chapter 7: Joseph Smith: An Instrument in the Hands of God

"Joseph Smith, the latter-day Prophet, was an instrument in the hands of the Lord in opening a new gospel dispensation, the last and greatest of all gospel dispensations."

President Benson continued to find opportunities throughout his life to share his witness of Joseph Smith's calling. For example, when he was serving as United States secretary of agriculture, a radio station invited him to choose a favorite scripture passage to be read over the air, and he chose a portion of Joseph Smith—History in the Pearl of Great Price.

Above all, he regularly bore a firm and powerful testimony to his fellow Saints. "Joseph Smith was a prophet of the Living God," he declared, "one of the greatest prophets that has ever lived upon the earth. He was the instrument in God's hand in ushering in a great gospel dispensation, the greatest ever, and the last of all in preparation for the second coming of the Master."

I am not surprised that Joseph Smith is the focus on an entire chapter in Ezra Taft Benson's manual. In fact, Mormonism's founder has been the focus of more chapters in the series featuring LDS presidents since 1998 than any other topic or leader. According to Mormonism, a denial of Smith and his legacy means the whole religion falls apart.

Consider what important LDS leaders have said:

> "I honor and revere the name of Joseph Smith. I delight to hear it; I love it. I love his doctrine" (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young*, p. 345).
>
> "The whole foundation of this Church rests firmly upon the inspiration of the living God through Joseph Smith the Prophet" (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Heber J. Grant*, p. 16).
>
> "Many of the benefits and blessings that have come to me have come through that man who gave his life for the gospel of Jesus Christ. There have been some who have belittled him, but I would like to say that those who have done so will be forgotten and their remains will go back to mother earth, if they have not already gone, and the odor of their infamy will never die, while the glory and honor and majesty and courage and fidelity manifested by the Prophet Joseph Smith will attach to his name forever" (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: George Albert Smith*, p. 34).
>
> "No one else, but Joseph Smith, has ever made the claim that this restoration and setting up of the kingdom (i.e. Church of Jesus Christ) has ever been revealed. Joseph Smith has

proclaimed to the world that power, keys, and authority were bestowed upon him. No one else has arisen to make such a claim; yet, this was revealed preparatory to these momentous and final restorations" (Joseph Fielding Smith, *Selections from Answers to Gospel Questions: A Course of Study for the Melchizedek Priesthood Quorum 1972-73*, p. 338).

"We must accept the divine mission of the Prophet Joseph Smith as the instrumentality through which the restoration of the gospel and the organization of the Church of Jesus Christ was accomplished. Each member of the Church, to be prepared for the millennial reign, must receive a testimony, each for himself, of the divinity of the work established by Joseph Smith" (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Harold B. Lee*, p. 71).

"Joseph knew, as no other soul living, these absolutes: He knew that God lives, that He is a [glorified] person with flesh and bones and personality, like us or we like Him, in His image. He knew that the long-heralded trinity of three Gods in one was a myth, a deception. He knew that the Father and the Son were two distinct beings with form, voices, and . . . personalities. He knew that the gospel was not on the earth, for by the Deities he had learned it, and the true Church was absent from the earth, for the God of heaven and earth had so informed him" (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball*, p. 230. Ellipses in original).

"An acquaintance said to me one day: 'I admire your church very much. I think I could accept everything about it—except Joseph Smith.' To which I responded: 'That statement is a contradiction. If you accept the revelation, you must accept the revelator" (President Gordon B. Hinckley, "Joseph Smith, Jr.: Prophet of God, Mighty Servant," *Ensign*, December 2005, p. 2).

"How grateful we are to Joseph for his worthiness to witness what he did for us. How grateful we should be that we are allowed to stand by Joseph with our own actions and testimonies of the Father and the Son" (Seventy Emeritus Cecil O. Samuelson, "Stand by my Servant Joseph," *Ensign*, February 2013, p. 39).

These quotes will serve as a background to this topic.

Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson

Joseph Smith's First Vision was the greatest event in this world since the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As a young man, Joseph Smith was a seeker after truth. Confusion among existing churches led him to inquire of God which of them was true. In answer to that prayer, he asserted that a pillar of brilliant light appeared. These are his words:

"When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!" (JS—H 1:17.)

Joseph asked the second personage, who was Jesus Christ, which one of the Christian sects was correct. He was told that he must not join any of them, that none were correct.

When God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ come to earth, as they did in 1820 when they appeared to the young boy prophet, Joseph Smith, it is not something that concerns only a handful of people. It is a message and a revelation intended for all of our Father's children living upon the face of the earth. It was the greatest event that has ever happened in this world since the resurrection of the Master. Sometimes I think we are so close to it that we don't fully appreciate its significance and importance and the magnitude of it.

A church manual explains,

> "For your testimony of the restored gospel to be complete, it must include a testimony of Joseph Smith's divine mission. The truthfulness of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints rests on the truthfulness of the First Vision and the other revelations the Lord gave to the Prophet Joseph" (*True to the Faith,* 2004, p. 90).

If this event plays such a major role in Mormonism's history, why is there no mention of this "First Vision" story in the early years of the church among the writings of LDS leaders or members, including Joseph Smith himself? Mormon historian James B. Allen concedes that the First Vision narrative, as understood by modern LDS members, is suspiciously absent for much of Mormonism's early history. He wrote,

> According to Joseph Smith, he told the story of the vision immediately after it happened in the early spring of 1820. As a result, he said, he received immediate criticism in the community. There is little if any evidence, however, that by the early 1830's Joseph Smith was telling the story in public. At least if he were telling it, no one seemed to consider it important enough to have recorded it *at the time*, and no one was criticizing him for it. Not even in his own history did Joseph Smith mention being criticized in this period for telling the story of the first vision. The interest, rather, was in the Book of Mormon and the various angelic visitations connected with its origin ("The Significance of Joseph Smith's 'First Vision' in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, autumn 1966, p. 30).

Allen continued to say "that none of the available contemporary writings about Joseph Smith in the 1830s, none of the publications of the Church in that decade, and no contemporary journal or correspondence yet discovered mentions the story of the first vision is convincing evidence that at best it received only limited circulation in those early days" (pages 30-31).

If the First Vision story was actually being circulated, Smith's detractors would have found this to be a lightning rod for criticism. Yet Allen stated that "the earliest anti-Mormon literature attacked the Book of Mormon and the character of Joseph Smith but never mentioned the first Vision" (p. 31).

Smith's critics included Alexander Campbell, E. D. Howe, Ezra Booth, John Corrill, and J. B. Turner. Allen went on to say,

> "Not until 1843, when the *New York Spectator* printed a reporter's account of an interview with Joseph Smith, did a *non-Mormon* source publish any reference to the story of the first vision. In 1844 I. Daniel Rupp published *An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States*, and this work contained an account of the vision provided by Joseph Smith himself. It seems probable; however, that as far as non-Mormons were concerned there was little, if any, awareness of it in the 1830's."

Allen says that it was not until 1842 that a detailed account of the First Vision was printed in a Mormon publication. "The *Times and Seasons* began publication in 1839, but, as indicated above, the story of the vision was not told in its pages until 1842. From all this it would appear that the general church membership did not receive information about the first vision until the 1840's and that the story certainly did not hold the prominent place in Mormon thought that it does today" (p. 32). The 1842 report of the First Vision can be found in *Times and Seasons,* April 1, 1842, 3:743.

As an explanation for why this story is missing, Allen suggests that Smith may have felt "experiences such as these should be kept from the general public because of their extremely sacred nature" (p. 34). If so, should it be assumed that everyone who allegedly knew of this story had the will to set aside its evangelistic capabilities when speaking to a skeptical prospective convert? Is this even remotely reasonable when it is understood how Smith's encounter has profound importance in bolstering Mormonism's current view of the Godhead? Consider also that such "sacredness" didn't seem to prohibit the LDS Church from eventually using this narrative as a missionary tool.

This missing portion of early Mormon history may explain why several LDS General Authorities have given conflicting views regarding the First Vision. Note these examples:

• Brigham Young (1801–1877): “The Lord did not come with the armies of heaven . . . But He did send His angel to this same obscure person, Joseph Smith jun., . . . and informed him that he should not join any of the religious sects of the day, for they were all wrong” (*Journal of Discourses*, 2:171).

• John Taylor (1808–1887): “How did this state of things called Mormonism originate? We read that an angel came down and revealed himself to Joseph Smith and manifested unto him in vision the true position of the world in a religious point of view . . . None of them was right, just as it was when the Prophet Joseph asked the angel which of the sects was right that he might join it. The answer was that none of them are right. What, none of them? No”(Ibid., 10:127; 20:167).

• George A. Smith (1817–1875): “Joseph Smith had attended these meetings, and when this result was reached he saw clearly that something was wrong. He had read the Bible and had found that passage in James which says ‘If any of you lack wisdom let him ask of God that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not,’ and taking this literally, he went humbly before the Lord and inquired of Him, and the Lord answered his prayer, and revealed to Joseph, by the ministration of angels, the true condition of the religious world. When the holy angel appeared, Joseph inquired which of all these denominations was right and which he should join, and was told they were all wrong,—they had all gone astray, transgressed the laws, changed the ordinances and broken the everlasting covenant, and that the Lord was about to restore the priesthood and establish His Church, which would be the only true and living Church on the face of the whole earth” (Ibid., 12:334).

Joseph Smith himself recorded a conflicting view in his 1832 diary when he claimed he saw only “the Lord” in the “16th year of my age.” Instead of being told by two personages that all the churches were wrong, in this account he claimed to have already known that the churches “had apostatized from the true and living faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament” (*Joseph Smith’s 1832–34 Diary*, 5).

Keep in mind that there were no other witnesses to this event. In essence, in order to accept this account, one must put complete faith and trust in Joseph Smith and him alone.

Even if it had been possible for Smith to see God, Doctrine and Covenants 84:21–22 explains that the priesthood would have been needed in order for Smith to see Him. It reads,

> “And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh; For without this no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live.”

Melvin J. Petersen, who taught church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University, acknowledged that Smith had no such priesthood in 1820, the year he claimed to have seen God. However, he pointed to John 1:18 of the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible to support the idea that Smith saw God, which reads, "No man hath seen God at any time, *except he hath bourne record of the Son*" (*A Sure Foundation*, 79).

In noting this dilemma, Brigham Young University professor Charles R. Harrell stated,

> "Explanations about how Joseph could have seen God before being ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood or having received its ordinances have been varied. Early Mormon brethren who confronted this issue concluded that Joseph did hold the priesthood having, in some sense, brought it with him from the preexistence."

Harrell went on to say, "According to Joseph Fielding Smith, since the priesthood wasn't yet on the earth, young Joseph was exempt from this requirement" (Harrell, *"This Is My Doctrine,"* 146 n. 65).

The first vision of the Prophet Joseph Smith is bedrock theology to the Church.

The most evident truth that emerged from the Prophet's experience in 1820 was the reality of God's existence and the fact that Jesus Christ was indeed resurrected. He saw them as separate, distinct, glorified Personages who spoke to him as one man speaks to another.

I am humbly grateful for the knowledge that I have that God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ, as glorified beings have again come to this earth in our day, in this dispensation; that they did in very deed appear unto the boy prophet. … This was the most glorious manifestation of God the Father and the Son of which we have record.

If the First Vision never happened and Joseph Smith later conjured up the notion in an attempt to give his story some credibility, it creates a major problem because it calls into question his calling as a prophet and his integrity as a whole. As Gordon B. Hinckley stated in a 1961 general conference message,

> "I would like to say that this cause is either true or false. Either this is the kingdom of God, or it is a sham and a delusion. Either Joseph talked with the Father and the Son, or he did not. If he did not, we are engaged in blasphemy" (*Conference Reports*, October 1961, 116).

Therefore, the Latter-day Saint needs to refrain from accepting the story based merely on faith and take a closer look at the history of Smith's crucial claim.

For more on the First Vision, check out these Viewpoint on Mormonism podcasts:

First Vision Accounts (Gospel Topics Essay) Part 1 Part 2 Part 3 Part 4 Part 5 Part 6 Part 7 Part 8 Part 9 Part 10 June 2-13, 2014 (Article 1) (Article 2) (Article 3)

The First Vision and the Resurrection (Rob Bowman) April 22, 2014 (Article 1) (Article 2) (Article 3)

First Vision November 23, 2011 (Article 1) (Article 2) (Article 3)

Consistent with New Testament prophecy, Joseph Smith received new revelation and angelic visitations.

It is generally understood that the faith of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints rests on the claim that Joseph Smith is a prophet of God, and also that he declared the coming forth of the Book of Mormon was the result of angelic visitations to him between the years 1823 and 1827.

Upon learning of this claim, some people contend that it seems preposterous that angels would visit the earth in this modern era.

No, what really is preposterous is that a man (Moroni) who supposedly lived in the fifth century AD could come back as an angel. What biblical precedence is there for this? In fact, nowhere does the Bible say it is possible for once-living humans to return in angelic form.

The Bible contains testimony that God directed the affairs of His church on earth for over four thousand years by revelation and, when necessary, by heavenly ministrations.

What does it mean, "heavenly ministrations"? And again, if Moroni had once been human, an explanation must be provided to show how he was able to return in angelic form.

In describing conditions of the last days incident to the second coming of Jesus Christ, John prophesied in the New Testament that before the Savior's return, the world would receive a warning that the hour of God's judgment was near. That warning would come by an angel from heaven declaring an "everlasting gospel." Hear his words:

"I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people,

"Saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters." (Rev. 14:6–7.)

If one accepts the testimony of John the Revelator, new revelation and a visitation by a heavenly messenger to earth should be expected.

Our solemn testimony is that this angelic messenger appeared to the Prophet Joseph Smith in the early nineteenth century. This announcement that an angel from God appeared to a prophet in our times is entirely consistent with the prophecies of the New Testament and should therefore command the interest of every earnest seeker after truth.

On the evening of 21 September 1823, an angel appeared to the Prophet Joseph Smith. The angel's name was Moroni. He was the last of a long line of ancient prophets of two great civilizations who lived … on the American Continent centuries ago. Moroni came to Joseph Smith in fulfillment of prophecy.

This interpretation by the former Mormon prophet is nothing more than eisegesis, or reading into the passage. Consider, for instance, the preceding verses in this passage:

- 144,000 saints standing with the Lamb (Jesus) on Mount Zion (verse 1)
- A new song sung by only the 144,000 (verse 3)
- These beings had kept their virginity (verse 4) and had never lied (verse 5)

Then, in verse 6, the eternal gospel is announced by the angel to the inhabitants of earth. While Mormons believe that the angel Moroni (a former human) delivered gold plates to Smith, when did this angelic being ever announce the "eternal gospel" to "every nation (ethnos), tribe, language, and people"? Originally written in a language nobody knew (supposedly Reformed Egyptian), the Book of Mormon was said to be translated by Smith into King James-style English.

However, the Book of Mormon still has *not* been translated into every language almost two centuries later…far from it. And when did Moroni ever proclaim anything to anyone other than Smith? Thus, how can verse 6 even be considered fulfilled? In verse 7, it says the "hour of His judgment has come." Did Jesus judge the earth in the 1820s? If this is referring to a future event, then verse 6 should not be interpreted as having already occurred.

Noticeably, Benson stopped quoting at verse 7 and didn't continue with verse 8, which talks about a "second angel" who spoke about "Babylon the Great" that would fall and make all nations drink the wine of sexual immorality, bringing wrath.

In verse 9, John mentions a mark of the beast put on people's foreheads and hands. If verses 6 and 7 refer to events that have already happened (the introduction of the Book of Mormon to the earth), then the Mormon is obligated to explain these additional symbolic references and how they too were fulfilled.

Instead of referring to Moroni and any other event from the past, there is no doubt that Revelation 14 is talking about events in the future. It is unfair to pull a verse (or two) out of context and make it say something it was never intended to say.

The Book of Mormon is the most singular evidence of Joseph Smith's calling as a prophet.

The most singular evidence in support of Joseph Smith's claim to being a spokesman for Almighty God was the publication of a scriptural record, the Book of Mormon.

The Book of Mormon is a record of the ancient inhabitants of the American continent and records the visit and ministry of Jesus Christ to the people on this continent following His ascension at Jerusalem. The major purpose of the record is to convince a later generation that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. The Book of Mormon, therefore, constitutes an additional witness, along with the Bible, to the divinity of Jesus Christ.

If the Book of Mormon is not a historical book because the events it records never happened, shouldn't a Mormon want to know? Because there is no archaeological or historical evidence to support the book, there are different theories where the Book of Mormon actually took place. The Book of Mormon lands are probably most commonly believed to be in the Central American area. This theory has not been without its critics, including Joseph Fielding Smith, who wrote:

> Within recent years there has arisen among certain students of the *Book of Mormon* a *theory* to the effect that within the period covered by the *Book of Mormon,* the Nephites and Lamanites were confined almost entirely within the borders of the territory comprising Central America and the southern portion of Mexico—the isthmus of Tehauntepec probably being the "narrow neck" of land spoken of in the *Book of Mormon* rather than the isthmus of Panama. . . . In the face of this evidence coming from the Prophet Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer, we cannot say that the Nephites and Lamanites did not possess the territory of the United States and that the Hill Cumorah is in Central America. Neither can we say that the great struggle which resulted in the destruction of the Nephites took place in Central America (*Doctrines of Salvation,* 3:232, 239–40. Ellipsis mine, italics his).

Smith also said:

> It must be conceded that this description fits perfectly the land of Cumorah in New York, as it has been known since the visitation of Moroni to the Prophet Joseph Smith, for the hill is in the proximity of the Great Lakes and also in the land of many rivers and fountains. *Moreover, the Prophet Joseph Smith himself is on record, definitely declaring the present hill called Cumorah to be the exact hill spoken of in the Book of Mormon. . . .* It is difficult for a reasonable person to believe that such men as Oliver Cowdery,

> Brigham Young, Parley P. Pratt, Orson Pratt, David Whitmer, and many others, could speak frequently of the Spot where the Prophet Joseph Smith obtained the plates as the Hill Cumorah, and not be corrected by the Prophet, if that were not the fact. That they did speak of this hill in the days of the Prophet in this definite manner is an established record of history. (Ibid., 3:233–34. Ellipsis ours, italics his.)

Apostle James Talmage also placed the Nephite people in North America when he wrote:

> At that time North America was inhabited by two great peoples, the Nephites and the Lamanites, each named after an early leader, and both originally of one family stock. Except for brief periods of comparative peace the two nations lived in a state of hostility due to Lamanite aggression (*The Vitality of Mormonism*, 199).

Benson insisted that not only did the alleged Nephites live in the area of the United States, but that Adam and the Jaredites lived there as well.

> Consider how very fortunate we are to be living in this land of America. The destiny of this country was forged long before the earth was even created. . . . This was the place of three former civilizations: that of Adam, that of the Jaredites, and that of the Nephites (*Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson,* 587–88).

Despite the above comments, many modern LDS scholars have since abandoned the idea that the Book of Mormon lands include areas of North America. In doing so they have claimed that such leaders as those above were misinformed. In a personal letter to Bill McKeever on June 11, 1992, Dr. John Sorenson stated that Joseph Fielding Smith "misread relevant historical documents." While it is certainly possible that Smith could have done so, we must bear in mind that he held the position of a trusted LDS Church historian for nearly half a century. Yet a message from the First Presidency in 1930 stated:

> Jesus Christ, referring to the time when he would manifest himself in the latter days, declared that whereas he manifested himself to his own people in the meridian of time and they rejected him, in the latter days he would come first to the Gentiles, and then to the house of Israel. He says: "And behold, this people (the Nephites) will I establish in this land, (America) and it shall be a new Jerusalem." (*Messages of the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (1833–1951),* 6 vols., ed. James R. Clark, 5:285).

In a declaration made by the First Presidency on May 1, 1911 and printed in the *Deseret News* a few days later, President Joseph F. Smith and his counselors Anthon Lund and John Henry Smith stated that it was Moroni himself who claimed to have "ministered to a people called Nephites, a branch of the house of Israel, formerly inhabiting *this land" (*Ibid*.,* 4:232, emphasis mine).

Conflicting information of this sort must certainly be confusing to the Latter-day Saint, especially since there is, for example, an LDS Church marker located north of Gallatin, Missouri, stating how a Nephite altar once existed near the place Joseph Smith called Adam-ondi-Ahman. If the Nephites were relegated to an area in Central America, how did one of their altars appear as far north as the state of Missouri?

While most LDS scholars would feel that there is historical and scientific value in the Book of Mormon, we have found no scientist or historian outside the Mormon faith who would support such a notion. On August 25, 1984, John Carlson addressed a Sunstone Symposium in Salt Lake City where he noted,

> "The Book of Mormon itself has not made a significant contribution to New World archaeology. Ask any New World archaeologist." When asked on June 16, 1999 if he had changed this position, he said, "No, I have not changed my opinion and would stand by what I said."

Carlson, who now serves as the director for the Center for Archaeoastronomy at the University of Maryland, did note that "interest in the Book of Mormon by believers has stimulated interest in the ancient Americas and promoted archaeological research." While he stated that much of this research is good and unbiased, "there are also plenty of examples of highly biased research designed to support the Book of Mormon" (E-mail to Bill McKeever, 16 June 1999).

Michael D. Coe, a non-Mormon professor emeritus of anthropology at Yale University, is an expert in the early history of Mesoamerica. Among Coe's works are *Mexico* and *The Maya,* both published by Thames and Hudson. He wrote a paper in 1973 that discussed the lack of historical evidence in the Book of Mormon. Said Coe:

> Mormon archaeologists over the years have almost unanimously accepted the Book of Mormon as an accurate, historical account of the New World peoples between about 2000 BC and AD 421. They believe that Smith could translate hieroglyphs, whether "Reformed Egyptian" or ancient American. . . . Let me now state uncategorically that as far as I know there is not one professionally trained archaeologist, who is not a Mormon, who sees any scientific justification for believing the foregoing to be true, and I would like to state that there are quite a few Mormon archaeologists who join this group. . . . The bare facts of the matter are that nothing, absolutely nothing, has ever shown up in any New World excavation which would suggest to a dispassionate observer that the Book of Mormon, as claimed by Joseph Smith, is a historical document relating to the history of the early migrants to our hemisphere ("Mormons and Archaeology: An Outside View," *Dialogue* 8 (summer 1973): 41, 42, 46).

With a hint of sarcasm, Coe concluded with these suggestions:

> Forget the so-far fruitless quest for the Jaredites, Nephites, Mulekites, and the lands of Zarahemla and Bountiful: there is no more chance of finding them than of discovering the ruins of the bottomless pit described in the book of Revelations. . . . Continue the praiseworthy excavations in Mexico, remembering that little or nothing pertaining to the Book of Mormon will ever result from them (Ibid., 48).

Despite the fact that many experts in the field of anthropology concur with Coe's 1973 assessment, some Mormons have tried to set it aside by claiming that his comments are outdated. Did new evidence cause him to change his position since 1973? Bill wrote Coe in 1993 to see if he still believed twenty years later what he had written in 1973. He responded:

> I haven't changed my views about the Book of Mormon since my 1973 article. I have seen no archaeological evidence before or since that date which would convince me that it is anything but a fanciful creation by an unusually gifted individual living in upstate New York in the early 19th century (Personal letter addressed to Bill McKeever, 17 August 1993).

Mormon apologist L. Ara Norwood claims that the analysis by Coe (and any other non-LDS scholar, for that matter) should be rejected because he is not Mormon. He wrote:

> So we have a non-Latter-day Saint archaeologist who does not believe in the supernatural claims of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon due to the lack of "scientific evidence"? Is that significant? If a non-Latter-day Saint individual were to come to believe in the supernatural/spiritual claims of the Book of Mormon, would not that person then in all likelihood join the Latter-day Saint church? *(Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, 5:329).

Pointing out recent LDS research, including Mormon scholar John Sorenson's 1985 book *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon,* Norwood notes in a footnote that "it is interesting to note that Coe's essay appeared twelve years before Sorenson's book was published" (330). However, as shown above, Coe (and other non-LDS scholars) *still* rejects scientific backing for the *Book of Mormon.* Norwood seems to miss the point. Coe is not basing his conclusion on the *spiritual* significance of the Book of Mormon but on the lack of *historical* significance.

Something else to consider is that the LDS Church has a history of being very sensitive about its scholars disseminating information that is anything less than "faith promoting." In the world of Mormonism, image plays a major role, and many scholars have been disciplined for exposing information that can be damaging to that image.

Mormon archaeologists may argue that they just need more time to discover pertinent artifacts that will help to validate the Book of Mormon. However, biblical archaeologists have not had much of a head start over their Mormon counterparts.

According to Jack Meinhart, an associate editor of the magazine *Biblical Archaeology Review,* archaeology as a science is not much more than a century old. The golden ages of biblical archaeology occurred between the 1920s and World War II and the decades of the 1960s and 1970s. Certainly people found things in the biblical lands before then, but interpreting what they were and extracting legitimate information has come more recently.

Truly serious research in the biblical lands has been going on only since the nineteenth century, and the vast majority of what we know today wasn't discovered until the twentieth century. And despite all of the evidence that has been uncovered, some have estimated that 90 percent of the evidence in the biblical lands is still buried in the sands. The technology of this age will help scientists understand more in a quicker time.

According to the article "From Camels to Computers" in *Biblical Archaeology Review,* "Until very recently, our tools have been modest worker's implements: trowels, picks, levels and buckets. Supplementing these now are a whole array of high-tech machines that are swiftly changing the way we excavate" (vol. 21, no. 4 [July/August 1995]: 45). Until Book of Mormon evidence moves beyond the realm of faith, it can be rightly classified as a myth, legend, or story without any basis in historical fact.

Joseph Smith obtained this ancient record from a heavenly messenger, just as John prophesied.

And, as shown above, Smith took John's words from Revelation 14 out of context.

This angel appeared to him and revealed the location of ancient records which were inscribed on metallic plates and buried in a stone vault. In due time, the young prophet was given the plates and the means by which they were translated. The book was then published to the world as canonized scripture.

Also, in harmony with the testimony of John, the book contains "the everlasting gospel." It is now preached by our missionaries to the world.

We invite you to test the validity of our witness about the origin of the Book of Mormon. You can do this by reading it and asking our Heavenly Father if these things are true. I promise you, if you are sincere, you will receive a confirmation of the truthfulness by the Holy Ghost. Millions, with soberness and sincerity, testify they know it is from God.

One of the most common approaches Mormon missionaries may take with prospective new converts involves opening the Book of Mormon to Moroni 10:4. It reads,

> And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.

One church manual explains, "In order to know that the Book of Mormon is true, a person must read, ponder, and pray about it. The honest seeker of truth will soon come to feel that the Book of Mormon is the word of God." (*Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service*, 38). Another manual says,

> "A sincere reader may not immediately gain a testimony when reading the Book of Mormon. Further, some people may not recognize the testimony that is growing as they study and pray over this tremendous text. But the promise of Moroni will come" (*Book of Mormon Student Manual Religion* 121-122, 8).

Yet there are problems with this test. First of all, it is skewed. A person who "prays" but doesn't get the same answer as the missionary or other Latter-day Saints is viewed as not getting it correct. Perhaps a "sincere heart" was not in place. Or maybe "real intent" or a "faith in Christ" were missing. Regardless, a person who does not get the answer encouraged by the Mormons is needing to do better. Jeremiah 17:9 says a feeling one has can be disastrously wrong because "the heart is deceitfully wicked." Praying about a religious book, especially if it is fictional and not historical, is hardly an objective test.

Another problem is that the Book of Mormon is just one of four LDS scriptures. Why should it be prayed over while neglecting the other three? For that matter, should we pray about the Qur'an to see if Islam is true? Where does praying about a religion's scripture stop? If praying over a book is a way to determine truth, then why have many Mormons never even thought about limiting themselves to praying about just one scripture?

While Christians believe in prayer, they don't believe approaching communication with God in such a cavalier manner. We are *not* commanded to pray about whether or not it is moral to steal a neighbor's car and generally we understand that God's Word can direct us toward truth. This is why 1 Thessalonians 5:21 tells believers to "test everything."

The Bereans were considered to be more righteous than the Thessalonians in Acts 17:11 because they searched the scriptures (Old Testament) to see if what Paul taught lined up. While the missionaries may want potential converts to obtain a subjective feeling that the Book of Mormon (and ultimately, Mormonism) is true, they should instead request their audience to read the Bible for itself—not in light of "modern-day revelation"—and see if what Mormonism teaches is consistent with the special revelation we have been given.

For more information on this topic, we invite the reader to see chapter 27 ("Doesn't James 1:5 say we should pray for wisdom? Why won't you pray about the truth claims of Mormonism?") in our book *Answering Mormons' Questions* (Kregel, 2013).

If the Book of Mormon is true, then Jesus is the Christ, Joseph Smith was His prophet, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is true, and it is being led today by a prophet receiving revelation.

If the Book of Mormon is true, this doesn't necessarily mean that the LDS Church that is based in Salt Lake City, Utah is the one true church. Perhaps the Community of Christ based in Independence, MO had it right after all. Or even Warren Jeffs of the FLDS fame. There are a number of groups that claim the Book of Mormon for themselves. Yes, the LDS Church contains the largest following of Smith's followers. However, it is a rush to judgment to say, if the Book of Mormon is somehow true, that Mormonism's prophet really is receiving revelation.

God reestablished His kingdom on the earth through the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Christian denominations the world over have prayed for centuries for the kingdom of God to come [see Matthew 6:10]. We earnestly and publicly declare: that day is now here!

The prayer of a boy fourteen years of age, in the Sacred Grove, opened a new gospel dispensation.

God has again established his kingdom on the earth in fulfillment of prophecy. …

… Joseph Smith was called of God to reestablish that kingdom—The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I testify that he accomplished this work, that he laid the foundations and that he committed to the Church the keys and powers to continue the great Latter-day work, which he began under the direction of Almighty God.

To Joseph Smith appeared other beings, including John the Baptist and Peter, James, and John, who ordained him with authority to act in the name of God (see JS—H 1:68–72; D&C 27:5–13). The church and kingdom of God was restored in these latter days, even The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, with all the gifts, rights, powers, doctrines, officers, and blessings of the former-day Church. (See D&C 65; 115:3–4.)

The Prophet Joseph was commanded to go forth as an instrument in the hands of God and organize the Church, to publish to the world as an added testimony to the divinity of Jesus Christ, the Book of Mormon which was taken from the sacred records. …

This restoration of the gospel, the bringing back of light and truth, is intended for the benefit and blessing of all God's children. And so, humbly and gratefully, our missionaries go out into the

world to proclaim that there has been an apostasy from the truth, but that through the goodness of God the heavens have again been opened and the gospel revealed unto man through Joseph Smith, the Prophet.

Much faith is required to hold Joseph Smith in the high regard many Mormons do. After all, he was the *only* one who supposedly saw God the Father and Jesus at the "First Vision." He was the *only* one to see Moroni. He was the *only* one to see the Book of Mormon plates with his own eyes (the witnesses saw this through "vision").

He translated texts, including the Bible and the Book of Abraham, with no one looking over his shoulder. And we certainly have no ancient texts that could be used in support of his translations. Smith wrote dozens of sections of scripture, all said to be inspired by God and revealing God's plans and teachings. Yet so much of what he taught contradicted the Bible.

The evidence in support of Smith is scant to nonexistent. In essence, a Mormon must provide full allegiance to this man based on faith, despite how the evidence contradicts his claims. With so many questions, I would never be able to give someone like Smith a blank check.

Joseph Smith was loyal and true even unto death.

Simultaneous with the early development of the Church was a spirit of opposition and persecution. Wherever the tiny "mustard seed" was planted, attempts were made to frustrate its growth.

The fourteen-year-old boy stood true against the world. God knew his son when he was chosen. He knew he would be loyal and true even to death.

Some treated [Joseph Smith's] testimony with great contempt and began to incite false stories and persecution against him. The young prophet, like the Apostle Paul of old, would not recant his testimony, but defended his claim in these words:

"I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I do it; at least I knew that by so doing I would offend God, and come under condemnation." (JS—H 1:25.)

Joseph Smith the Prophet went willingly to his death. He sealed his testimony with his life—his own blood. On that fateful day in Nauvoo, Illinois, as he looked back upon his city and people whom he loved, on his way to Carthage Jail and his martyrdom, he declared: "This is the loveliest place and the best people under the heavens; little do they know the trials that await them" [History of the Church, 6:554].

Later the Prophet said feelingly, but calmly and courageously, "I am going like a lamb to the slaughter, but I am as calm as a summer's morning. I have a conscience void of offense toward God and toward all men. If they take my life I shall die an innocent man, and my blood shall cry from the ground for vengeance, and it shall be said of me, 'He was murdered in cold blood'" [History of the Church, 6:555].21

Thus did the Prophet Joseph Smith climax his earth life and fulfill the mortal part of his divinely appointed mission. This mortal mission, he made clear, was not to end until fully completed. Like the mission of the Savior, "a lamb slain before the foundation of the world" [see Revelation 13:8], Joseph was truly foreordained to his great mission.

According to a church manual,

> "**D&C 132:49–50. Exaltation Assured to Joseph Smith**. The Prophet Joseph Smith received the promise of eternal life—he had his calling and election made sure. God will extend the same promise to all of his children if they will obey him. Verse 49 explains why the Prophet Joseph received this promise. He was willing to lay all he had on the altar. He was hunted and persecuted, sued in courts of law, torn from family and loved ones, and all because he had testified that the heavens were not closed and that God speaks to His children. The Prophet Joseph is an example in this dispensation of how children of God should act. (See Notes and Commentary on D&C 131:5.)" (*Doctrines and Covenants Student Manual Religion 324 and 325*, p. 334. Bold in original).

President George Albert Smith declared, "To my mind one of the strongest testimonies of the divinity of the life of our Savior is the testimony of Joseph Smith who laid down his life as a witness of the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ" (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: George Albert Smith*, p. 27). This, I believe, is not a valid assessment, as I described in an article I wrote for the Christian Research Journal a few years ago. Go here.

Joseph Smith stands today as the head of this last and greatest of all gospel dispensations.

I know that Joseph Smith, although slain as a martyr to the truth, still lives and that as head of this dispensation—the greatest of all gospel dispensations—he will continue so to stand throughout the eternities to come.

The message of Joseph Smith—the message of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the message of Mormonism—is the most important message in this world. And Joseph Smith the Prophet, who lives today, continues to have an important part in its direction here on earth.

To get a vision of the magnitude of the Prophet's earthly mission we must view it in the light of eternity. He was among "the noble and great ones" whom Abraham described as follows:

"Now the Lord had shown unto me, Abraham, the intelligences that were organized before the world was; and among all these there were many of the noble and great ones;

"And God saw these souls that they were good, and he stood in the midst of them, and he said: These I will make my rulers; for he stood among those that were spirits, and he saw that they were good; and he said unto me: Abraham, thou art one of them; thou wast chosen before thou wast born." (Abraham 3:22–23.)

So it was with Joseph Smith. He too was there. He too sat in council with the noble and great ones. Occupying a prominent place of honor and distinction, he unquestionably helped in the planning and execution of the great work of the Lord to "bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man," the salvation of all our Father's children [see Moses 1:39]. His mission had had, and was to have, impact on all who had come to earth, all who then dwelt on earth, and the millions yet unborn.

The Prophet Joseph Smith made this eternal fact clear in these words: "Every man who has a calling to minister to the inhabitants of the world was ordained to that very purpose in the grand council of heaven before this world was. I suppose that I was ordained to this very office in that grand council. It is the testimony that I want that I am God's servant, and this people His people" [see History of the Church, 6:364]. …

The greatest activity in this world or in the world to come is directly related to the work and mission of Joseph Smith—man of destiny, prophet of God. That work is the salvation and eternal life of man. For that great purpose this earth was created, prophets of God are called, heavenly messengers are sent forth, and on sacred and important occasions even God, the Father of us all, condescends to come to earth and to introduce his beloved Son.

The Prophet Joseph Smith was not only "one of the noble and great ones," but he gave and continues to give attention to important matters here on the earth even today from the realms above. For in the eyes of the Lord, the God of this world under the Father, it is all one great eternal program in which the Prophet Joseph plays an important role, all through the eternal priesthood and authority of God.

I testify to you that Joseph Smith was and is a prophet of God, one of the truly great prophets of all time, a man of destiny, a man of character, a man of courage, a man of deep spirituality, a God-like prophet of the Lord, a truly noble and great one of all time.

Earlier I had provided a number of quotes from LDS leaders explaining the importance of Joseph Smith. Here are a few more:

> "Where shall we go to find another man who has accomplished a one-thousandth part of the good that Joseph Smith accomplished?" (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith*, p. 18).
>
> "Joseph Smith's last great act here upon the earth was one of selflessness. He crossed the room, most likely 'thinking that it would save the lives of his brethren in the room if he could get out, . . . and sprang into the window when two balls pierced him from the door, and one entered his right breast from without.' He gave his life; Willard Richards and John Taylor were spared. 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.' The Prophet Joseph Smith taught us **love**—by example" (Thomas S. Monson, "The Prophet Joseph Smith: Teacher by Example," *Ensign* (Conference Edition), November 2005, p. 69. Ellipses and bold in original).
>
> "I testify that Joseph Smith was an honest and virtuous man, . . ." (Apostle Neil Andersen, "Joseph Smith," *Ensign* (Conference Edition), November 2014, p. 31).

But what was Joseph Smith really like? Describing Smith's temperament and behavior, Richard S. Van Wagoner wrote:

> His backwoods savoir-faire sometimes impressed visitors whom he lavished with food, wine, and tall tales, but his frequent misuse of Latin, Hebrew, and German were plainly pedantic. His relish for competition in sports, matched by his ambition in commerce and politics, was not what people Joseph Smith expected from a divine. Nor could Smith resist the flourishes of military dress and parade, or dramatic staging of ritual and ceremony of all kinds. Embracing friends and lashing out verbally and physically at enemies, he was no Buddah [sic]. But perhaps the most scandalous manifestation of Smith's lust for manly achievement was his inclination toward extra-marital romantic liaisons, which he believed were licensed by the Old Testament and countenanced by God's modern revelation (*Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 290–91).

Smith's polygamous practices are even documented in a church history manual:

> His first recorded plural marriage in Nauvoo was to Louisa Beaman; it was performed by Bishop Joseph B. Noble on 5 April 1841. During the next three years Joseph took additional plural wives in accordance with the Lord's commands. As members of the Council of the Twelve Apostles returned from their missions to the British Isles in 1841, Joseph Smith taught them one by one the doctrine of plurality of wives, and each experienced some difficulty in understanding and accepting this doctrine. . . . After their initial hesitancy and frustration, Brigham Young and others of the Twelve received individual confirmations from the Holy Spirit and accepted the new doctrine of plural

> marriage. They knew that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God in all things. At first the practice was kept secret and was very limited. Rumors began to circulate about authorities of the Church having additional wives, which greatly distorted the truth and contributed to increased persecution from apostates and outsiders. Part of the difficulty, of course, was the natural aversion Americans held against "polygamy." This new system appeared to threaten the strongly entrenched tradition of monogamy and the solidarity of the family structure. Later, in Utah, the Saints openly practiced "the principle," but never without persecution (*Church History in the Fulness of Times Student Manual*, 256).

According to LDS Church historian Marlin K. Jensen, who served as a Seventy, Joseph Smith was both polygamous and polyandrous. In a Q&A session in Stockholm, Sweden, he explained,

> "Polygamy is when a man has multiple wives. Polyandry is when a man marries another man's wife. Joseph Smith did both" (Recorded September 28, 2010. See "A fiery 2010 fireside in Stockholm, Sweden").

Assistant LDS Church historian Richard E. Turley, Jr. agreed, adding, "Did Joseph Smith practice plural marriage? Yes. Many church members don't know it but the answer is yes. Did Joseph Smith practice polyandry? The answer is yes." A Mormon who knows about Smith's polygamy may say this is common knowledge, but notice how Turley said "many church members don't know it." Our experience proves Turley's conclusion correct.

While most Mormons seem to be aware that Brigham Young was a practicing polygamist, many have no idea that Smith was one as well. Even if they do know this fact, they may not have heard that one-third of Smith's thirty-three plural wives were teenagers when they were married to Smith. According to Todd Compton,

> Eleven (33 percent) were 14 to 20 years old when they married him. Nine wives (27 percent) were twenty-one to thirty years old. Eight wives (24 percent) were in Smith's own peer group, ages thirty-one to forty. In the group aged forty to fifty, there is a substantial drop o!: two wives, or 6 percent, and three (9 percent) in the group fifty-one to sixty. The teenage representation is the largest, though the twenty-year and thirty-year-groups are comparable, which contradicts the Mormon folk-wisdom that sees the beginnings of polygamy as an attempt to care for older, unattached women (*In Sacred Loneliness*, 11).

Smith did not limit his secret marriages to single women, as one-third of his wives were already married to other men. Compton explains:

> A common misconception concerning Joseph Smith's polyandry is that he participated in only one or two such unusual unions. In fact, fully one-third of his plural wives, eleven of them,

were married civilly to other men when he married them. If one superimposes a chronological perspective, one sees that of Smith's first twelve wives, nine were polyandrous. . . . none of these women divorced their "first husbands" while Smith was alive and all of them continued to live with their civil spouses while married to Smith (Ibid., 15, 16. For a list of Smith's wives and more information, see "Joseph Smith and Polygamy").

Some might argue that these relationships were strictly platonic. Compton disagrees:

> Because Reorganized Latter-Day Saints claimed that Joseph Smith was not really married polygamously in the full (i.e., sexual) sense of the term, Utah Mormons (including Smith's wives) affirmed repeatedly that he had physical sexual relations with them—despite the Victorian conventions in nineteenth century American culture which ordinarily would have prevented any mention of sexuality. . . . Some, like Emma Smith, conclude that Joseph's marriages were for eternity only, not for time (thus without earthly sexuality). But many of Joseph's wives affirmed that they were married to him for eternity and time, with sexuality included (Ibid., 12, 14; italics in original).

Compton concluded that though it is possible that Joseph had some marriages in which there were no sexual relations, there is not explicit or convincing evidence for this (except, perhaps, in the cases of the older wives, judging from later Mormon polygamy). And in a significant number of marriages, there is evidence for sexual relations (Ibid., 15).

While there is no DNA evidence to prove that Smith had children with these plural wives, "persistent oral and family traditions insist that Joseph fathered children by at least four of his plural wives" (Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith*, 98). Most of Smith's wives remained quiet about their relationship with the Mormon prophet, and Newell and Avery add that these women "refused either to confirm or deny whether they had given birth to his children" (99). Regardless, Jacob 2:30 provides what appears to be the only legitimate reason in the Book of Mormon for the allowance of polygamy: to "raise up seed" (or have children). As a Gospel Topics essay ("Race and the Priesthood") explains,

> Latter-day Saints do not understand all of God's purposes for instituting, through His prophets, the practice of plural marriage during the 19th century. The Book of Mormon identifies one reason for God to command it: to increase the number of children born in the gospel covenant in order to "raise up seed unto [the Lord]" (Jacob 2:30). Plural marriage did result in the birth of large numbers of children within faithful Latter-day Saint homes ("Plural Marriage and Families in Early Utah").

Yet if Smith had several dozen wives whom he married in order to produce more children, then why aren't these offspring known? And why would he marry other men's wives who already had husbands to father children by them? Regardless, it is difficult to justify Smith's behavior of

marrying other men's wives. Leviticus 20:10 declares that an adulterous act was punishable by death: "And the man that committeth adultery with another man's wife, even he that committeth adultery with his neighbour's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death." Besides teenagers and women who were married to living husbands, Smith married a mother and her daughter (Patty Bartlett [Sessions] and Sylvia Porter Sessions Lyons) as well as pairs of sisters (Huntington, Partridge, and Lawrence). This certainly seems in conflict with Leviticus 18:17–18 and 20:14.

Smith also targeted the young daughters of two of his closest associates. For instance, he attempted to make nineteen-year-old Nancy Rigdon one of his secret plural wives but was soundly rebuffed by her. When her father, Sidney, heard of the incident, he confronted Smith. Van Wagoner noted that Smith at first denied the story but recanted when Nancy failed to back off from her accusation. Shortly thereafter Smith had a letter sent to Nancy justifying his proposal when he said, "That which is wrong under one circumstance, may be, and often is, right under another" (Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 295–96).

In May 1843 the 37-year-old prophet of Mormonism convinced 14-year-old Helen Mar Kimball to be sealed to him as his plural wife. The daughter of Heber C. Kimball stated how Smith promised that if she would "take this step," it would ensure the eternal salvation and exaltation of her father's household and kindred. Helen was led to believe that the relationship was more of a spiritual nature and claimed she would have never gone through with it had she known otherwise (Ibid., 293–94).

Emma, Joseph's wife, was never in favor of polygamy. For instance, when Joseph's brother Hyrum took the revelation on plural marriage to Emma in the summer of 1843 to get her approval, he returned with his head down, saying, "I have never received a more severe talking to in my life. Emma is very bitter and full of resentment and anger," he said (Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith*, 152).

Newell and Avery write,

> "Emma would eventually know about some of Joseph's plural wives, her knowledge of seven can be documented conclusively, and some evidence hints that she may have known of others" (Ibid., 98). However, she was deceived by Smith on a number of occasions, and when she found out that certain women—including some of her best friends—were married to her husband, she became angry and even defiant. For instance, "when the full realization of the relationship between her friend Eliza [Snow] and her husband Joseph came to her, Emma was stunned. . . . Although no contemporary account of the incident between Emma and Eliza remains extant, evidence leads to the conclusion that some sort of physical confrontation occurred between the two women"(Ibid., 134).

History shows that Emma disdained plural marriage. After Joseph was killed in 1844, she denied to her dying day that her husband had ever married other women. When Joseph finally convinced his wife to accept plural marriage in May 1843, Emma told him that she would allow him to marry other women as long as she got to choose the new brides. As reported by Newell and Avery:

> Emma chose the two sets of sisters then living in her house, Emily and Eliza Partridge and Sarah and Maria Lawrence. Joseph had finally converted Emma to plural marriage, but not so fully that he dared tell her he had married the Partridge sisters two months earlier. Emily said that "to save family trouble Brother Joseph thought it best to have another ceremony performed. . . . [Emma] had her feelings, and so we thought there was no use in saying anything about it so long as she had chosen us herself"(Ibid., 143; ellipses in original).

The authors added that it didn't take long before "Emma began to talk as firmly and urgently to Joseph about abandoning plural marriage as he had formerly talked to her about accepting it." And even if it had been commanded by God, "she opposed the doctrine" and even "threatened divorce" (Ibid., 145, 158). The fact that Emma married a nonmember after the death of Joseph tends to prove that she did not believe plural marriage (or marriage at all) had anything to do with true salvation, as was taught in the LDS Church.

While many Mormons remain naïve about the polygamous ways of their church's founding prophet, how could a modern Mormon in good conscience revere someone who lied to his wife about his affairs with other women and secretly married women already married to his friends (often without their knowledge)? Any man who is willing to deceive his wife and his friends is certainly capable of lying to others.

Speaking at a general conference, Apostle M. Russell Ballard stated that one of the characteristics of a false prophet was someone who attempted "to change the God-given and scripturally based doctrines that protect the sanctity of marriage, the divine nature of the family, and the essential doctrine of personal morality" (*Ensign* (November 1999): 64). Ballard said such false prophets tend to redefine morality to justify, among other things, adultery and fornication. On such issues Mormons tend to turn a blind eye to Smith's egregious behavior. Why don't the standards given by Ballard apply to Joseph Smith?

I return to Apostle Neil L. Andersen's quote at the 2014 general conference: "I testify that Joseph Smith was an honest and virtuous man, . . ." ("Joseph Smith," *Ensign* (Conference Edition), November 2014, p. 31). Really? If you are a Latter-day Saint, is this really the man you want to emulate?

For more information on this topic, consider the following podcasts:

- Was Joseph Smith a Braggart? Part 1 Part 2 Part 3 September 30-October 2, 2014
- What if Thomas S. Monson were more like Joseph Smith? December 9, 2011 (Series of articles)
- The 1820 Revival November 22, 2011

Yes, Joseph Smith, the latter-day Prophet, was an instrument in the hands of the Lord in opening a new gospel dispensation, the last and greatest of all gospel dispensations.

Based on what I have written in this review, I politely but firmly disagree with this lofty assessment.

Chapter 8: The Power of the Word

"The word of God, as found in the scriptures, in the words of living prophets, and in personal revelation, has the power to fortify the Saints and arm them with the Spirit so they can resist evil, hold fast to the good, and find joy in this life."\

Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson

The word of God, as found in the scriptures, in the words of living prophets, and in personal revelation, has the power to fortify the Saints and arm them with the Spirit so they can resist evil, hold fast to the good, and find joy in this life.

Before we go any further, it is important to properly define the word "scriptures" as meant by Benson and other LDS teachers. For many Christians who don't know very much about the Mormon Church and its teachings, the statement above could be joyfully met with open arms. After all, the Christian is thinking that only through the Bible can a person be armed with the Spirit and find joy. However, in Mormonism, the term "scripture" means so much more.

According to Mormonism, written scripture is the Bible (King James Version), the Book of Mormon, the Pearl of Great Price, and the Doctrine and Covenants. These four books together are called the standard works. In addition, the inspired words of the living prophet, official church writings, and general conference addresses. As tenth LDS President Joseph Fielding Smith explained,

> WHAT IS SCRIPTURE? When one of the brethren stands before a congregation of the people today, and the inspiration of the Lord is upon him, he speaks that which the Lord would have him speak. It is just as much scripture as anything you will find written in any of these records, and yet we call these the standard works of the Church (*Doctrines of Salvation* 1:186).

Thirteenth President Ezra Taft Benson stated,

> The inspired words of prophets, when written down, have become scripture, and whenever God has His representatives on the earth, there is always new revelation and new scripture (see D&C 68:3-4). Only when men become so corrupt that the prophets are taken out of their midst do scriptures cease. And God has stated that only through His authorized representatives could men receive the ordinances essential for salvation and the commandments necessary for the perfection of His children (*Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson*, p. 132).

With that as a background, let's see what Benson has to say about the "Power of the Word."

President Ezra Taft Benson frequently testified of the power of God's word.

When individual members and families immerse themselves in the scriptures, other aspects of Church activity automatically come.

Now to you priesthood leaders we say, look to the prophetic counsel of Lehi and Paul and others like them. In that counsel you will find the solution to the challenges you face in keeping your flocks safe from the "ravening wolves" that surround them. (See Matt. 7:15; Acts 20:29.) We know that you too have great anxiety for the members of your wards and stakes and expend great time and effort in their behalf. There is much that we ask of you who have been chosen for leadership. We place many loads upon your shoulders. You are asked to run the programs of the Church, interview and counsel with the members, see that the financial affairs of the stakes and wards are properly handled, manage welfare projects, build buildings, and engage in a host of other time-consuming activities.

When Benson acknowledges that "many loads (are) upon your shoulders" along with a reference to "a host of other time-consuming activities," he is not kidding. Church members are expected to serve in "callings." Some responsibilities may require only an hour or two a week, while others (such as serving a term as a branch president or bishop) could literally take dozens of hours. I have personally known many Latter-day Saints who have served the church at the neglect of their families. With so many Mormon parents having five or more children, there is not enough time in the day for many of these hard-working folks to spend adequate time fostering relationships with their kids.

Great blessings come "when individual members and families immerse themselves in the scriptures."

In a First Presidency message in 1976, President [Spencer W.] Kimball said:

"I am convinced that each of us, at least some time in our lives, must discover the scriptures for ourselves—and not just discover them once, but rediscover them again and again. …

"The Lord is not trifling with us when he gives us these things, for 'unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required.' (Luke 12:48.) Access to these things means responsibility for them. We must study the scriptures according to the Lord's commandment (see 3 Ne. 23:1–5); and we must let them govern our lives." (Ensign, Sept. 1976, pp. 4–5.)

In April 1982, Elder Bruce R. McConkie spoke to the regional representatives about the priority the scriptures should take in our labors. He said: "We are so wound up in programs and statistics and trends, in properties, lands and mammon, and in achieving goals that will highlight the excellence of our work, that we have 'omitted the weightier matters of the law.' … However

talented men may be in administrative matters; however eloquent they may be in expressing their views; however learned they may be in the worldly things—they will be denied the sweet whisperings of the Spirit that might have been theirs unless they pay the price of studying, pondering, and praying about the scriptures." (In Regional Representatives' Seminar, 2 Apr. 1982, pp. 1–2.)

That same day, Elder Boyd K. Packer spoke to the stake presidents and regional representatives. He said: "Buildings and budgets, and reports and programs and procedures are very important. But, by themselves, they do not carry that essential spiritual nourishment and will not accomplish what the Lord has given us to do. … The right things, those with true spiritual nourishment, are centered in the scriptures." (In Meeting with Stake Presidents and Regional Representatives, 2 Apr. 1982, pp. 1–2.)

I add my voice to these wise and inspired brethren and say to you that one of the most important things you can do as priesthood leaders is to immerse yourselves in the scriptures. Search them diligently. Feast upon the words of Christ. Learn the doctrine. Master the principles that are found therein. There are few other efforts that will bring greater dividends to your calling. There are few other ways to gain greater inspiration as you serve.

I believe that the Bible has words of life (Heb. 4:12, 2 Tim. 2:15, 3:16). So if we were talking about the Bible and reading *its* words, I would certainly agree with Benson's statement. I recommend that the Latter-day Saint pick up God's Word—even in a modern translated language that is easier to understand—and study it while making proper interpretations. (Some excellent modern versions can be found here at this website.

For many, the King James Version of the Bible is just difficult to understand because of its ancient English. Therefore, some easier-to-understand versions include the New International Version, the English Standard Version, and the Living Bible.) I challenge the reader to carefully go through the book of Romans to see if the teachings of the Mormon Church are consistent with what Paul wrote almost 2,000 years ago. If you are interested in taking this challenge, then check out this website.

Meanwhile, the words of the other "Standard Works" and the teachings of the LDS leadership so often contradict the Bible that there is no purpose in "immersing" oneself in them.

As we study God's word, we receive guidance in our daily lives, healing of the soul, and power to avoid deception and resist temptation.

Again, if this sentence was just talking about the Bible, it is exactly right. But, as the next paragraph will attest, this is not the only "scripture" Benson intended.

The Prophet Joseph Smith said that "the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book." (Book of Mormon, Introduction, italics added.) Isn't that what we want for the members of our wards and stakes? Aren't we desirous that they get nearer to God? Then encourage them in every way possible to immerse themselves in this marvelous latter-day witness of Christ.

Here are 10 good reasons why the Book of Mormon should not be considered authoritative scripture.

Do you have members in your stakes whose lives are shattered by sin or tragedy, who are in despair and without hope? Have you longed for some way to reach out and heal their wounds, soothe their troubled souls? The prophet Jacob offers just that with this remarkable promise: "They have come up hither to hear the pleasing word of God, yea, the word which healeth the wounded soul." (Jacob 2:8; italics added.)

If the Book of Mormon is fictional literature, then anything it says must be understood to be man-made writing and is therefore not inspired as scripture by the Almighty God.

Today the world is full of alluring and attractive ideas that can lead even the best of our members into error and deception. Students at universities are sometimes so filled with the doctrines of the world they begin to question the doctrines of the gospel. How do you as a priesthood leader help fortify your membership against such deceptive teachings? The Savior gave the answer in His great discourse on the Mount of Olives when He promised, "And whoso treasureth up my word, shall not be deceived." (JS—M 1:37; italics added.)

The same as what I wrote above goes for the Pearl of Great Price.

The scriptures are replete with similar promises about the value of the word. Do you have members who long for direction and guidance in their lives? The Psalms tell us, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Ps. 119:105), and Nephi promises that feasting upon the words of Christ "will tell you all things what ye should do." (2 Ne. 32:3.)

When the Bible alone is considered, certainly *scripture* is a lamp unto our feet and a light onto our path. But unless the words of Christ as found in the Book of Mormon are direct quotations from the Bible, we should take anything this "scripture" (or any other purported scripture, for that matter, including the Gospel of Thomas) says with a grain of salt. Feast upon Christ's words and nothing else.

Are there members of your flock who are deep in sin and need to pull themselves back? Helaman's promise is for them: "Yea, we see that whosoever will may lay hold upon the word of

God, which is quick and powerful, which shall divide asunder all the cunning and the snares and the wiles of the devil." (Hel. 3:29.)

Helaman is found in the Book of Mormon and is not considered scripture by Christians.

The word of the Lord is a valuable gift, and we must not treat it lightly.

And if we ignore what the Lord has given us, we may lose the very power and blessings which we seek. In a solemn warning to the early Saints, the Lord said this of the Book of Mormon: "Your minds in times past have been darkened because of unbelief, and because you have treated lightly the things you have received—

"Which vanity and unbelief have brought the whole church under condemnation.

"And this condemnation resteth upon the children of Zion, even all.

"And they shall remain under this condemnation until they repent and remember the new covenant, even the Book of Mormon." (D&C 84:54–57.)

All of the above quotes come from non canonical literature and are not considered authoritative by Christians.

Oh, my brethren, let us not treat lightly the great things we have received from the hand of the Lord! His word is one of the most valuable gifts He has given us. I urge you to recommit yourselves to a study of the scriptures. Immerse yourselves in them daily so you will have the power of the Spirit to attend you in your callings. Read them in your families and teach your children to love and treasure them. Then prayerfully and in counsel with others, seek every way possible to encourage the members of the Church to follow your example. If you do so, you will find, as Alma did, that "the word [has] a great tendency to lead people to do that which [is] just—yea, it [has] more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, which [has] happened unto them." (Alma 31:5.)

I challenge the Latter-day Saint to read the Bible with an open heart and mind, compare its teachings with those as found in Mormonism, and determine if LDS doctrine is compatible with biblical teaching. If you are honest, you will see that there is no comparison.

Chapter 9: The Book of Mormon: Keystone of our Religion

"Is there not something deep in our hearts that longs to draw nearer to God? … If so, then the Book of Mormon will help us do so more than any other book."\

Out of all the prophets in the Mormon Church, probably none was more of an advocate of the primacy of the Book of Mormon than thirteenth president Ezra Taft Benson. And the statement given above is very clearly "Bensonian," if there was even such a term. If we want to draw near to God, then no other scripture is better for a source than the Book of Mormon, according to this 20th century leader. Let's see if this unique LDS scripture can deliver the goods.

The following quotations, all from sermons President Benson delivered as President of the Church, provide a sampling of his warnings and promises related to the Book of Mormon:

"Now we not only need to say more about the Book of Mormon, but we need to do more with it. Why? The Lord answers: 'That they may bring forth fruit meet for their Father's kingdom; otherwise there remaineth a scourge and judgment to be poured out upon the children of Zion' [D&C 84:58]. We have felt that scourge and judgment!

To the Christian, the words "Book of Mormon" ought to be replaced with the "Bible." While we don't need to say more about the Bible, it is clearly important to Christians all over the world.

"… The Book of Mormon has not been, nor is it yet, the center of our personal study, family teaching, preaching, and missionary work. Of this we must repent."

If the Book of Mormon truly is God's Word, then yes, it would be important to have more personal study, family teaching, preaching, and missionary work come from it. But if it is not…? Honestly, I do wish the Mormon leadership would emphasize pure Bible teaching in this type of way. The Word of God has revolutionized the lives of so many believers today when they took it seriously and pondered its words.

"We have not been using the Book of Mormon as we should. Our homes are not as strong unless we are using it to bring our children to Christ. Our families may be corrupted by worldly trends and teachings unless we know how to use the book to expose and combat falsehoods. … Our missionaries are not as effective unless they are [teaching] with it. Social, ethical, cultural, or educational converts will not survive under the heat of the day unless their taproots go down to the fulness of the gospel which the Book of Mormon contains. Our Church classes are not as Spirit-filled unless we hold it up as a standard."

Mormon leaders have talked about the Book of Mormon being the "fullness of the gospel " many times. In fact, this chapter uses that term five times. We'll come back to this later.

"I bless you with increased understanding of the Book of Mormon. I promise you that from this moment forward, if we will daily sup from its pages and abide by its precepts, God will pour out upon each child of Zion and the Church a blessing hitherto unknown—and we will plead to the Lord that He will begin to lift the condemnation—the scourge and judgment. Of this I bear solemn witness."

These are serious words: condemnation, scourge, and judgment. Obviously Benson thought very highly of this book.

"I do not know fully why God has preserved my life to this age, but I do know this: That for the present hour He has revealed to me the absolute need for us to move the Book of Mormon forward now in a marvelous manner. You must help with this burden and with this blessing which He has placed on the whole Church, even all the children of Zion.

Again, his sincerity seems genuine.

"Moses never entered the promised land. Joseph Smith never saw Zion redeemed. Some of us may not live long enough to see the day when the Book of Mormon floods the earth and when the Lord lifts His condemnation. (See D&C 84:54–58.) But, God willing, I intend to spend all my remaining days in that glorious effort."

And needless to say, he did advocate the Book of Mormon to the end of his days.

Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson

The Book of Mormon is the keystone of our religion.

How important is the Book of Mormon? Joseph Smith called it "the keystone of our religion." (History of the Church, 4:461.) "Take away the Book of Mormon and the revelations," he said, "and where is our religion? We have none." (History of the Church, 2:52.) A keystone is the central stone in an arch. It holds all the other stones in place, and if removed, the arch crumbles.

… Just as the arch crumbles if the keystone is removed, so does all the Church stand or fall with the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. The enemies of the Church understand this clearly. This is why they go to such great lengths to try to disprove the Book of Mormon, for if it can be discredited, the Prophet Joseph Smith goes with it. So does our claim to priesthood keys, and revelation, and the restored Church. But in like manner, if the Book of Mormon be true—and millions have now testified that they have the witness of the Spirit that it is indeed true—then one must accept the claims of the Restoration and all that accompanies it.

Joseph Smith claimed the Book of Mormon was "the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book" (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 194). Let's spend a little time talking about this claim.

Getting nearer to God has been associated in Mormonism with eternal life, which is also called exaltation or godhood. According to *Gospel Principles*:

> These are some of the blessings given to exalted people:
>
> 1. They will live eternally in the presence of Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ (see D&C 76:62).
>
> 2. They will become gods (see D&C 132:20–23).
>
> 3. They will be united eternally with their righteous family members and will be able to have eternal increase.
>
> 4. They will receive a fulness of joy.
>
> 5. They will have everything that our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ have—all power, glory, dominion, and knowledge (see D&C 132:19–20).
>
> "Specific ordinances" that must be "received to be exalted" include:
>
> 1. We must be baptized.
>
> 2. We must receive the laying on of hands to be confirmed a member of the Church of Jesus Christ and to receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.
>
> 3. Brethren must receive the Melchizedek priesthood and magnify their callings in the priesthood.
>
> 4. We must receive the temple endowments.
>
> 5. We must be married for eternity, either in this life or in the next.
>
> In addition to receiving the required ordinances, the Lord commands all of us to:
>
> 1. Love God and our neighbors.
>
> 2. Keep the commandments.

3. Repent of our wrongdoings.

4. Search out our kindred dead and receive the saving ordinances of the gospel for them.

5. Attend our Church meetings as regularly as possible so we can renew our baptismal covenants by partaking of the covenants.

6. Love our family members and strengthen them in the ways of the Lord.

7. Have family and individual prayers every day.

8. Teach the gospel to others by word and example.

9. Study the scriptures.

10. Listen to and obey the inspired words of the prophets of the Lord.

Numerous requirements never mentioned in the Book of Mormon must be met. In addition, the Book of Mormon does not discuss other important LDS doctrines, including:

- The Mormon Church organization, on which its leaders place so much emphasis
- The Melchizedek priesthood order
- The Aaronic priesthood order
- A plurality of gods
- God is an exalted man
- The potential for humans to attain godhood
- Three degrees of glory
- Preexistence
- Eternal progression
- Heavenly Mother
- Temporary hell

In all actuality, there is no evidence to suggest that the Nephites mentioned in the Book of Mormon believed or practiced much of what modern-day Mormons believe and practice today. BYU professor Charles Harrell notes,

> It is noteworthy that the doctrines expressed in the Book of Mormon tend to bear closer similarity to those found in early nineteenth-century Protestantism than to those in later Mormonism. (*This is My Doctrine*, p. 20)

Hence, I must ask, “Which precepts was Joseph Smith talking about?”

The quote from above also says "than any other book." Just what does the Book of Mormon have that the Bible doesn't? At this point, many Mormons would immediately say, "Faith. Repentance. Baptism." The Bible has all of these. What else? The Mormon has a hard time coming up with anything else not already adequately talked about in the Bible. Meanwhile, so many issues (as listed above) are strangely missing in a book that is supposed to epitomize gospel precepts.

In addition, there is an admission that if the Book of Mormon is false, the entire LDS religion goes with it. There are two underbellies of Mormonism that, if the stake goes through their hearts, the result would be fatal. Indeed, the First Vision and the authenticity of the Book of Mormon are crucial to the faith of Latter-day Saints. Historically, if neither of these were historical, then Mormonism is based on fables (fiction), not fact. And the Mormon leadership and their apologists all know it. So, while some may attack the Book of Mormon, these men do all they can to defend it.

As Joseph Smith himself said,

> Take away the Book of Mormon and the revelations, and where is our religion? We have none (*History of the Church* 2:52).

And Apostle Orson Pratt added,

> This book must be either *true or false*. If true, it is one of the most important messages ever sent from God to man, affecting both the temporal and eternal interests of every people under heaven to the same extent and in the same degree that the message of Noah affected the inhabitants of the old world. If false, it is one of the most cunning, wicked, bold, deep-laid impositions ever palmed upon the world, calculated to deceive and ruin millions who will sincerely receive it as the word of God, and will suppose themselves securely built upon the rock of truth until they are plunged with their families into hopeless despair. The nature of the message in the Book of Mormon is such, that if true, no one can possibly be saved and reject it; if false, no one can possibly be saved and receive it (*Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon*, 1:1, Liverpool, October 15, 1850).

Perhaps there is nothing that testifies more clearly of the importance of this book of scripture than what the Lord Himself has said about it.

By His own mouth He has borne witness (1) that it is true (D&C 17:6), (2) that it contains the truth and His words (D&C 19:26), (3) that it was translated by power from on high (D&C 20:8), (4) that it contains the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ (D&C 20:9; 42:12), (5) that it was given by inspiration and confirmed by the ministering of angels (D&C 20:10), (6) that it gives

evidence that the holy scriptures are true (D&C 20:11), and (7) that those who receive it in faith shall receive eternal life (D&C 20:14).

All of these passages that claim how God is speaking has but sole witness: Joseph Smith. To believe that God said these things is to place full faith in the Mormon founder himself. Isn't this a bit of circular reasoning? After all, Joseph Smith claimed that Moroni gave him gold plates. We must trust Smith on this.

Then, in the Doctrine and Covenants, again there were no witnesses to verify how God communicated with Smith to write down these things. And in these passages, God "tells" Smith how the Book of Mormon can be trusted. Thus, the D&C verifies the BOM, both originating from the pen of the Mormon Church founder. If Smith is not trustworthy, should these be accepted at face value?

The Book of Mormon testifies of Jesus Christ and brings us nearer to God.

The major mission of the Book of Mormon, as recorded on its title page, is "to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations."

Consider the descriptions used to support Joseph Smith's statement of the major mission of the Book of Mormon:

1. Jesus is the Christ: Christ means Messiah, and certainly Christians believe that this is who Jesus is.
2. The eternal God: Consider the idea of what this means. Eternal means with no beginning and no end. Jesus is not even the top god of this world, let alone all previous worlds. He is a creation of God the Father in the preexistence and humanity's brother. When the Book of Mormon was compiled, Joseph Smith's ideas had not yet been evolved. At this time, Smith apparently believed that Jesus was God in the flesh and not just "a" god. (A little later, we'll take a closer look at the Book of Mormon's teaching that God is "unchangeable.")
3. Manifesting himself unto all nations: Mormons often point out that if there were people in the Americas, wouldn't Jesus come to them? After all, the Nephites and Lamanites are part of the ethnos (nations). But if Jesus appeared in the Americas, why not Austrailia? Papua New Guinea? Alaska? New Zealand? Or any other place where people existed?

The honest seeker after truth can gain the testimony that Jesus is the Christ as he prayerfully ponders the inspired words of the Book of Mormon.

According to Mormonism, praying about the Book of Mormon is the key to determining truth. One of the most common approaches Mormon missionaries may take with prospective new converts involves opening the Book of Mormon to Moroni 10:4. It reads,

> And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.

An LDS missionary resource explains,

> In order to know that the Book of Mormon is true, a person must read, ponder, and pray about it. The honest seeker of truth will soon come to feel that the Book of Mormon is the word of God. (*Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service*, p. 38)

Another church manual says,

> A sincere reader may not immediately gain a testimony when reading the Book of Mormon. Further, some people may not recognize the testimony that is growing as they study and pray over this tremendous text. But the promise of Moroni will come. (*Book of Mormon Student Manual*, p. 8)

Yet there are problems with this challenge. First of all, the test is skewed. A person who "prays" but doesn't get the same answer as the missionary is viewed as not getting it right. If prayer is the correct means of testing the book's authenticity, why is a negative outcome immediately rejected as a plausible response?

Though the Mormons may not say so, it is likely that they would question whether or not such a person had a "sincere heart" or "real intent." It could also imply that the person lacked a necessary "faith in Christ." However, Jeremiah 17:9 says a feeling one has can be disastrously wrong because "the heart is desperately wicked." Praying about a religious book, especially if it is fictional and not historical, is hardly an objective test.

If the Book of Mormon is just one of four LDS scriptures, why should *it* be prayed over and not the other three scriptures? For that matter, why shouldn't a seeker after truth pray about the Qu'ran (Islam), the Vedas (Hinduism), or the Tripitaka (Buddhism)? Where does praying about a particular religion's scripture stop? If praying about a book is a way to determine truth, then why have many Mormons never even thought about expanding their prayers to more than just one religion's scripture?

While Christians believe in prayer, they don't believe it is appropriate to approach communication with God in such a cavalier manner. First Thessalonians 5:21 tells believers to

"test everything." The Bereans were considered to be more righteous than the Thessalonians in Acts 17:11 because they searched the Scriptures (Old Testament) to see if what Paul taught was consistent.

While the Mormon missionaries may want potential converts to obtain a subjective feeling that the Book of Mormon (and ultimately, Mormonism) is true, they should instead request their audience to read the Bible for itself—not in light of "modern-day revelation"—and see if what Mormonism teaches is consistent with the special revelation already given.

Do we remember the new covenant, even the Book of Mormon? In the Bible we have the Old Testament and the New Testament. The word testament is the English rendering of a Greek word that can also be translated as covenant. Is this what the Lord meant when He called the Book of Mormon the "new covenant"? It is indeed another testament or witness of Jesus. This is one of the reasons why we have recently added the words "Another Testament of Jesus Christ" to the title of the Book of Mormon. …

Mormon leaders can call this book "another testament of Jesus Christ," but if what is talked about in this book is not historical, does it really matter? What kind of witness of the historical Jesus would it be able to offer?

The Book of Mormon is the keystone in our witness of Jesus Christ, who is Himself the cornerstone of everything we do. It bears witness of His reality with power and clarity. Unlike the Bible, which passed through generations of copyists, translators, and corrupt religionists who tampered with the text,

Let's stop in midsentence. As in, "Whoa Nellie." This assessment is completely inaccurate. As the eighth LDS Article of Faith says, the Bible can be trusted only "as far as it is translated correctly." What does this mean? Translation means to take words from one language and put them into the words of another. If the Bible were true only as far as it is *translated* correctly, we would certainly agree. Unfortunately, those who mistakenly think the Bible cannot be trusted apparently do not understand how the Bible has been *transmitted* since the post-New Testament times.

The Bible was written primarily in Hebrew and Koine Greek. Anytime the words from one language are put into another—whether it is Spanish into English or French into Arabic—there is always the risk of losing something in the translation. It is doubtful that our many modern-day translations were produced by unprincipled people who wanted to keep God's truths hidden. In actuality, quite the opposite is true.

The motivation behind a new translation is, in most cases, to give a clearer understanding of what God wants to reveal to His people. Granted, some translations do a better job at achieving

this goal than others. However, does Article Eight correctly state the problem the LDS Church has with the Bible? Some Mormons have recognized that the word *translated* as used in the Articles of Faith is not entirely correct. Knowledgeable Mormons who have studied the methods of translating languages admit that the *transmission*, not the *translation*, of the biblical texts concerns them.

Transmission refers to how the manuscripts were copied and handed down through the centuries. A number of Mormons contend that the manuscripts were corrupted, claiming that unscrupulous people had purposely left out "many plain and precious truths" and inserted their own erroneous philosophies. However, this is an argument from silence, since these same detractors cannot produce any untainted manuscripts against which to measure the "tainted" ones.

Although translations will differ, a good translation will go back to the most accurate manuscripts and then attempt to put the words of the Bible into an understandable language for the audience it addresses. Two translators of any written piece will differ in the choice of words, verb tense, and style. But if two good Spanish translators independently translate this morning's paper, most likely the basic message would be the same despite their numerous differences. There is no such thing as a *perfect* translation.

The LDS Church leaders must certainly be aware of this, since their translators have often had to revise not only their English edition of the Book of Mormon but several foreign editions as well. When it comes to the transmission of the text, the Bible has much going for it. For example, consider the wealth of manuscript evidence for the New Testament:

There are complete Greek texts of the NT from the fourth century, and many earlier papyri of parts of it have survived, some from as early as the middle of the second century. In all, we have over 5,800 Greek manuscripts of the NT, though the majority of these are later and of lesser value.

There is also a wide variety of manuscript evidence for the early versions in Latin, Syriac, and Coptic, among others, as well as numerous citations from the NT books by early Christian writers whose works are preserved. The NT is thus vastly better attested than any other ancient literature. The works of Tacitus, by contrast, survive in only two incomplete manuscripts written many centuries after his time, between them covering only about half of what he is known to have written. (*The Challenge of Bible Translation: Communicating God's Word to the World*, p. 179)

Christian theologian Ron Rhodes lists some of the incredible statistics of the manuscript support for the Bible, including:

> There are more than 24,000 partial and complete manuscript copies of the New Testament. . . . There are also some 86,000 quotations from the early church fathers and several thousand Lectionaries (church-service books containing Scripture quotations used in the early centuries of Christianity). . . . The Dead Sea Scrolls prove the accuracy of the transmission of the (Old Testament). In fact, in those scrolls discovered at Qumran in 1947, we have Old Testament manuscripts that date about a thousand years earlier (150 B.C.) than the other Old Testament manuscripts then in our possession (which dated to A.D. 900). The significant thing is that when one compares the two sets of manuscripts, it is clear that they are essentially the same, with very few changes. The fact that manuscripts separated by a thousand years are essentially the same indicates the incredible accuracy of the Old Testament's manuscript transmission. Source

As far as the reliability of the Greek and Hebrew manuscripts that we have today, biblical scholar Bruce Metzger said:

> The earlier copies are generally closer to the wording of the originals. The translators of the 1611 King James Bible, for instance, used Greek and Hebrew manuscripts from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Today Bible translators have access to Greek manuscripts from the third and fourth centuries and Hebrew manuscripts from the era of Jesus. We even have the Ryland's Papyrus, just a torn page with a few verses from John 18, that we can date between A.D. 100 and 150. So today we have access to a text of the Old and New Testaments that is more basic, more fundamental, less open to charges of scribal error or change. Source

Responding to a question about most surviving New Testament manuscripts hailing from a century or two after the originals were written, Metzger said:

> By contrast, our copies of other ancient writings, like those of Virgil or Homer, are often many hundreds of years later than their originals. In some of those writings, we have only one copy! The New Testament, on the other hand, has many copies. No key doctrine of the Christian faith has been invalidated by textual uncertainty. On the other hand, some passages have been affected. For example, take Mark 9:29. Jesus is explaining how he was able to cast out a demon, and in the earliest manuscripts, he is quoted as saying, "This kind can come out only by prayer." In the Greek manuscripts the KJV translators used, the two words "and fasting" are tacked on. I do not think that is an earth-shaking difference, but it is typical of the kind of changes we are talking about.

Finally, if the Bible cannot be trusted because so many evil middlemen got their hands on it, then we must ask how it is possible to trust:

- James 1:5, the verse used by Joseph Smith that led him to pray about seeking truth?

- 1 Corinthians 15:29, which is used to support baptism for the dead as a necessary work in the LDS temples
- John 10:16, that the American people were referenced as the "other sheep"
- James 2:20, 26, that faith without works is dead

The list could go on and on. The point is that no Mormon should be able to quote from the Bible to support his or her points if this collection of 66 books is not trustworthy. Perhaps the Mormon would want to utilize the Joseph Smith Translation.

the Book of Mormon came from writer to reader in just one inspired step of translation.

This is also not true. Just as we do not have the autographs (original) of any book of the Bible, so we do not have the autographs of any book of the Book of Mormon. This is because the angel supposedly took the plates back after Smith was finished. His scribes wrote down the translation onto paper. Then the printer made a copy.

Since that time, almost 4,000 changes have been made to "correct" the errors that are said to have emanated from the printer's copy. While Benson makes it sound so smooth and convenient, the fact is that there was more than just one "step." While it should seem simpler because there is only one "translator," there are still many problems, causing a rational person to doubt if what was written is actually what was supposed to have been said.

Therefore, its testimony of the Master is clear, undiluted, and full of power. But it does even more. Much of the Christian world today rejects the divinity of the Savior. They question His miraculous birth, His perfect life, and the reality of His glorious resurrection. The Book of Mormon teaches in plain and unmistakable terms about the truth of all of those. It also provides the most complete explanation of the doctrine of the Atonement. Truly, this divinely inspired book is a keystone in bearing witness to the world that Jesus is the Christ.

Historically, the Christian church teaches in the divinity of Jesus. Heretics deny this. Much of what is written about Jesus was merely cribbed from the four biblical gospel accounts. Actually, little to nothing about Jesus can be learned that isn't talked about in the Bible, which on its own clearly bears witness to the world that Jesus is the Christ.

In the Book of Mormon, the testimony of Jesus Christ is "clear, undiluted, and full of power."

The Prophet Joseph Smith … said, "I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book" [History of the Church, 4:461]. … Is there not something deep in our hearts that longs to draw nearer to God, to be more like Him in

our daily walk, to feel His presence with us constantly? If so, then the Book of Mormon will help us do so more than any other book. …

We referenced this quote at the beginning of the review, establishing that there is so much taught today in Mormonism that is never even mentioned in the Book of Mormon. For example, the Book of Mormon seems to even contradict LDS teaching. One doctrine would be the possibility of receiving salvation after death. Consider Alma 34:35, which offers this stern warning to the "wicked" who put off repentance:

> For behold, if ye have procrastinated the day of your repentance even until death, behold, ye have become subjected to the spirit of the devil, and he doth seal you his; therefore, the Spirit of the Lord hath withdrawn from you, and hath no place in you, and the devil hath all power over you; and this is the final state of the wicked.

What is this final state of the wicked? It seems very clear that this includes the Lord's Spirit being withdrawn from them so that the devil has all power over them and the ability to claim them as his own. Nowhere does this passage imply that this situation ever changes since it is considered "final." Or how about the doctrine of eternal hell, denied today in Mormonism? Second Nephi 28:21–22 provides a warning:

> And others will he pacify, and lull them away into carnal security, that they will say: All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well—and thus the devil cheateth their souls, and leadeth them away carefully down to hell. And behold, others he flattereth away, and telleth them there is no hell; and he saith unto them: I am no devil, for there is none—and thus he whispereth in their ears, until he grasps them with his awful chains, from whence there is no deliverance.

Our beloved brother, President Marion G. Romney, … who knows of himself of the power that resides in this book, testified of the blessings that can come into the lives of those who will read and study the Book of Mormon. He said:

"I feel certain that if, in our homes, parents will read from the Book of Mormon prayerfully and regularly, both by themselves and with their children, the spirit of that great book will come to permeate our homes and all who dwell therein. The spirit of reverence will increase; mutual respect and consideration for each other will grow. The spirit of contention will depart. Parents will counsel their children in greater love and wisdom. Children will be more responsive and submissive to the counsel of their parents. Righteousness will increase. Faith, hope, and charity—the pure love of Christ—will abound in our homes and lives, bringing in their wake peace, joy, and happiness" (Ensign, May 1980, p. 67).

Substitute the word “Bible” for the “Book of Mormon” and millions of Christians could give a similar testimony.

These promises—increased love and harmony in the home, greater respect between parent and child, increased spirituality and righteousness—are not idle promises, but exactly what the Prophet Joseph Smith meant when he said the Book of Mormon will help us draw nearer to God.

Mormons are told to draw near to a God who is much different in nature than the God as defined by their leaders. Let me take a moment to describe what I mean. According to the Book of Mormon, God doesn’t change His nature. Consider these passages:

> 3 Nephi 24:6 (quoting Mal. 3:6): “For I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.”
>
> Mormon 9:9-10: (quoting Heb. 13:8): “For do we not read that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and in him there is no variableness neither shadow of changing? And now, if ye have imagined up unto yourselves a god who doth vary, and in whom there is shadow of changing, then have ye imagined up unto yourselves a god who is not a God of miracles.”
>
> Mormon 9:19: “And if there were miracles wrought then, why has God ceased to be a God of miracles and yet be an unchangeable Being? And behold, I say unto you he changeth not; if so he would cease to be God; and he ceaseth not to be God, and is a God of miracles.”
>
> Moroni 7:22: “For behold, God knowing all things, being from everlasting to everlasting. . .”
>
> Moroni 8:18: “For I know that God is not a partial God, neither a changeable being; but he is unchangeable from all eternity to all eternity.”

These verses sound biblical, don’t they? Yet it didn’t take long before Joseph Smith corrupted this version of God. Consider how, in his famous King Follett Discourse discourse, he taught,

> God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens. That is the great secret… [Y]ou have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done before you…

In a later sermon Smith boldly preached:

> If Jesus Christ was the Son of God, and John discovered that God the Father of Jesus Christ had a Father, you may suppose that He had a Father also. Where was there ever a

> son without a father? And where was there ever a father without first being a son? Whenever did a tree or anything spring into existence without a progenitor? And everything comes in this way. Paul says that which is earthly is in the likeness of that which is heavenly, Hence if Jesus had a Father, can we not believe that He had a Father also? I despise the idea of being scared to death at such a doctrine, for the Bible is full of it.

To the contrary, God says in Isaiah 43:10, "Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me." Psalm 90:2 says of him, "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God." This is the God Christians worship. Of him we can say, "Who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen." (Romans 11:34-36)

For an interesting look at this topic, visit here.

The Book of Mormon teaches true doctrine, confounds false doctrine, and exposes the enemies of Christ.

If this is true, then the God of Mormonism as described above by Joseph Smith is false and should be adamantly rejected. Should we consider Smith's take as "false doctrine" and Smith an "enemy of Christ"?

The Lord Himself has stated that the Book of Mormon contains the "fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ" (D&C 20:9). That does not mean it contains every teaching, every doctrine ever revealed. Rather, it means that in the Book of Mormon we will find the fulness of those doctrines required for our salvation. And they are taught plainly and simply so that even children can learn the ways of salvation and exaltation. The Book of Mormon offers so much that broadens our understandings of the doctrines of salvation. Without it, much of what is taught in other scriptures would not be nearly so plain and precious.

Notice the equivocation. The fullness of the gospel of Jesus does not "contain every teaching," as Kimball puts it. It would seem that *fullness* ought to contain the basic teachings of the gospel, including temple work, marriage for eternity, work for the dead, etc. Also, we have just shown how the doctrine of God of Mormonism (as taught by Smith) is contrary to the teachings of the Book of Mormon. Has God always been God? Is He really from everlasting to everlasting? Or could Joseph Smith (and today's Mormon Church) be wrong about this issue?

As far as preaching the gospel is concerned, the Book of Mormon contains the clearest, most concise, and complete explanation.

Moroni 8:18: “For I know that God is not a partial God, neither a changeable being; but he is unchangeable from all eternity to all eternity.”

Historic Mormonism: “As man is God once was, as God is man may be.” (Lorenzo Snow couplet, as approved by Joseph Smith in 1840)

Was God a human, as taught in the Snow couplet, who became “a” god somewhere in his progression? Or was God always God? Which is the “clearest, most concise, and complete explanation” for a verse like Moroni 8:18?

There is no other record to compare with it. In what record do you get such a complete understanding of the nature of the Fall, the nature of physical and spiritual death, the doctrine of the Atonement, the doctrine of justice and mercy as it relates to the Atonement, and the principles and ordinances of the gospel?

Answer to this question: The Bible! Here are just a few verses (2 or 3) for explanation for each of the points provided by Benson:

Nature of the Fall:

Genesis 2:17: “but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.”

Romans 3:23: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Romans 5:18-21: “For then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous. The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Nature of physical and spiritual death:

Romans 5:12-14: “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned. To be sure, sin was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not charged against anyone’s account where there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who is a pattern of the one to come.

Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Doctrine of the Atonement:

Isaiah 53:5-6: “But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.”

1 Corinthians 15:22: “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.”

1 Peter 2:24: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.”

1 John 3:5: “You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.”

Doctrine of justice and mercy (in relation to Atonement):

Ephesians 2:4-10: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

1 Peter 3:18: “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.”

Hebrews 13:12: “So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.”

Principles and ordinances of the gospel

John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Acts 4:12: “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

Romans 10:9-10: “because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”

These are just a few of the passages that can be used to show how the Book of Mormon is not needed to give fulness to the teachings provided. Nothing more is needed.

The Book of Mormon contains the most comprehensive account of these fundamental doctrines.

I think the Bible already has a handle on these teachings and doesn't need any help.

The Book of Mormon … verifies and clarifies the Bible. It removes stumbling blocks, it restores many plain and precious things. We testify that when used together, the Bible and the Book of Mormon confound false doctrines, lay down contentions, and establish peace. (See 2 Ne. 3:12.)

Which stumbling blocks? Certainly there are people who misinterpret the Bible—I would even say Mormon leaders do this. However, when rightly interpreted, the words of the Bible give life and provide true doctrine.

We … should know the Book of Mormon better than any other book. Not only should we know what history and faith-promoting stories it contains, but we should understand its teachings. If we really do our homework and approach the Book of Mormon doctrinally, we can expose the errors and find the truths to combat many of the current false theories and philosophies of men.

If someone studied the Book of Mormon in a doctrinally sound way and had no other resources upon which to study, would he come to the same conclusion as Joseph Smith when it came to the nature of God?

I have noted within the Church a difference in discernment, insight, conviction, and spirit between those who know and love the Book of Mormon and those who do not. That book is a great sifter.

The Book of Mormon exposes the enemies of Christ. It confounds false doctrines and lays down contention. (See 2 Ne. 3:12.) It fortifies the humble followers of Christ against the evil designs, strategies, and doctrines of the devil in our day. The type of apostates in the Book of Mormon are similar to the type we have today. God, with his infinite foreknowledge, so molded the Book of Mormon that we might see the error and know how to combat false educational, political, religious, and philosophical concepts of our time.

We could certainly delve into other doctrines like the idea there is only one God; that God is a Spirit and can not be a glorified man; that grace, faith and belief on God's name is needed, not our works (as the works of man merit nothing, according to Alma 22:14); that a person must be born again; that work for the dead "availeth nothing"; that there is an eternal hell; and that polygamy is an abomination. (For the last one, Alma 41:8 does say that the decrees of God are unalterable yet for almost half a century this doctrine was advocated by LDS leaders.)

As explained above, doctrines that are missing in the Book of Mormon include preexistence, the validity of genealogies, baptism for the dead, celestial marriage, three levels of glory, godhood potential for humankind, a temporary hell, eternal progression, temple work, and Mother God.

Should the Book of Mormon really be classified as the "most correct book on earth" and touted as helping "a man get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts than any other book"?

The Doctrine and Covenants is the binding link between the Book of Mormon and the continuing work of the Restoration.

To accept the Doctrine and Covenants, we are again beholden to Joseph Smith who was allowed to write down the words of God with no accountability. In essence, he had freedom to say whatever he wanted in the name of God.

I would like to speak particularly about the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants. These two great books of latter-day scripture are bound together as revelations from Israel's God for the purpose of gathering and preparing His people for the second coming of the Lord. …

To the Prophet Joseph Smith the Lord said, "This generation shall have my word through you" (D&C 5:10). The Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants are part of the fulfillment of that promise. Together these two great works of scripture bring great blessings to this generation.

Or, if they are not from God, to bring great curses to those who accept these teachings as valid.

Each of these two great latter-day scriptures bears powerful and eloquent witness of the Lord Jesus Christ. Virtually every page of both the Doctrine and Covenants and the Book of Mormon teaches about the Master—His great love for His children and His atoning sacrifice—and teaches us how to live so that we can return to Him and our Heavenly Father.

It is simply not the case that "virtually every page" of these two unique LDS scriptures is about Jesus. To run a comparison between the Bible and the Doctrine and Covenants would show great differences in the fundamental matters of faith.

Each of these two great latter-day books of scripture contains the knowledge and the power to help us live better lives in a time of great wickedness and evil. Those who carefully and prayerfully search the pages of these books will find comfort, counsel, guidance, and the quiet power to improve their lives.

The Doctrine and Covenants is the binding link between the Book of Mormon and the continuing work of the Restoration through the Prophet Joseph Smith and his successors.

In the Doctrine and Covenants we learn of temple work, eternal families, the degrees of glory, Church organization, and many other great truths of the Restoration. …

But wait, these are things either not taught or contradicted in the Book of Mormon. Did the so-called ancient Nephites and Lamanites believe in temple work, eternal families, degrees of glory, Church organization, etc.? The answer is no.

The Book of Mormon is the "keystone" of our religion, and the Doctrine and Covenants is the capstone, with continuing latter-day revelation. The Lord has placed His stamp of approval on both the keystone and the capstone.

At the same time, you would think that the keystone and capstone would be on the same page and not contradict each other. Yet the view of God in the Doctrine and Covenants is different from the God of the Book of Mormon. Is he Spirit (as Alma 18:2-5, 24-28; 22:9-11) says? Or does God have "a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's"?

The Doctrine and Covenants is a glorious book of scripture given directly to our generation. It contains the will of the Lord for us in these last days that precede the second coming of Christ. It contains many truths and doctrines not fully revealed in other scripture. Like the Book of Mormon, it will strengthen those who carefully and prayerfully study from its pages.

Do we, as Saints of the Most High God, treasure the word He has preserved for us at so great a cost? Are we using these books of latter-day revelation to bless our lives and resist the powers of the evil one? This is the purpose for which they were given. How can we not stand condemned before the Lord if we treat them lightly by letting them do no more than gather dust on our shelves?

My beloved brothers and sisters, I bear my solemn witness that these books contain the mind and the will of the Lord for us in these days of trial and tribulation. They stand with the Bible to give witness of the Lord and His work. These books contain the voice of the Lord to us in these latter days. May we turn to them with full purpose of heart and use them in the way the Lord wishes them to be used.

In these paragraphs, Benson advocates the study of the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants, both of which depend solidly on the testimony of Joseph Smith. I wish Benson had spent more time speaking about the importance of studying the Bible, which is a much more trustworthy book. In fact, if you are willing, I challenge you to read the book of Romans and see if its teachings are the same as what is taught by LDS leaders. May the Lord bless you as you challenge your preconceived notions with what is written in God's Holy Word.

Chapter 10: Flooding the Earth and Our Lives with the Book of Mormon

Millions have come unto Christ because of the truths in the book that Moroni delivered to Joseph Smith.

Despite the claim, "millions" have *not* come to Christ because of the Book of Mormon. Rather, millions have come to Chrsit through the Bible, God's special revelation. Even if we consider those who have converted to Mormonism, how can it be said that "millions" have come to the conclusion that the LDS Church is true based mainly on their personal testimony of the Book of Mormon.

It also ought to be pointed out that when Benson made this comment, there were fewer than 4 million Mormons in the entire world! Surely "millions" is quite an exaggeration.

Also, the majority of Latter-day Saints have become Mormons because they were born into the faith, they live in an area where the majority are LDS (including the states of Utah and Idaho as well as neighborhoods throughout the western United States), or they most appreciate the way Latter-day Saints take care of their families and each other. How many teenagers claim to be Mormon but have never even read this unique LDS scripture? I doubt the majority have. In fact, I have heard many Mormon missionary candidates whom I have either met or heard about who had not read this unique LDS scripture all the way through before their mission.

Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson

The Book of Mormon was written for us.

The Book of Mormon … was written for our day. The Nephites never had the book; neither did the Lamanites of ancient times. It was meant for us. Mormon wrote near the end of the Nephite civilization. Under the inspiration of God, who sees all things from the beginning, he abridged centuries of records, choosing the stories, speeches, and events that would be most helpful to us.

As I read this, I find it fascinating that Moroni supposedly "abridged" the records. What were these records written on? How did he compile these? And then he took everything and put these together on plates of gold? The story is so far-fetched that, really, it would require a miracle for everything to come together as it supposedly did.

Each of the major writers of the Book of Mormon testified that he wrote for future generations. … If they saw our day and chose those things which would be of greatest worth to us, is not that how we should study the Book of Mormon? We should constantly ask ourselves, "Why did the

Lord inspire Mormon (or Moroni or Alma) to include that in his record? What lesson can I learn from that to help me live in this day and age?"

And there is example after example of how that question will be answered. For example, in the Book of Mormon we find a pattern for preparing for the Second Coming. A major portion of the book centers on the few decades just prior to Christ's coming to America. By careful study of that time period, we can determine why some were destroyed in the terrible judgments that preceded His coming and what brought others to stand at the temple in the land of Bountiful and thrust their hands into the wounds of His hands and feet.

From the Book of Mormon we learn how disciples of Christ live in times of war. From the Book of Mormon we see the evils of secret combinations portrayed in graphic and chilling reality. In the Book of Mormon we find lessons for dealing with persecution and apostasy. We learn much about how to do missionary work. And more than anywhere else, we see in the Book of Mormon the dangers of materialism and setting our hearts on the things of the world. Can anyone doubt that this book was meant for us and that in it we find great power, great comfort, and great protection?

Of course, a case could be made for Aesop's Fables helping people have better lives. Or consider the possibility that someone gets instruction from the Quran, the Vedas, or the Tripitaka. Regardless of how many good moral instructions someone might receive from these sources, this doesn't make any of these books "scripture." Truth is not about pragmatism. If the Book of Mormon is a historical book—as Mormon leaders such as Benson purport it to be—and it really originates in God, then the lessons are scriptural. If not, then the lessons are nice but nothing more than made-up stories and should not be considered historical scripture.

As we study the Book of Mormon daily, the power of the book will flow into our lives.

It is not just that the Book of Mormon teaches us truth, though it indeed does that. It is not just that the Book of Mormon bears testimony of Christ, though it indeed does that, too. But there is something more. There is a power in the book which will begin to flow into your lives the moment you begin a serious study of the book. You will find greater power to resist temptation. You will find the power to avoid deception. You will find the power to stay on the strait and narrow path. The scriptures are called "the words of life" (D&C 84:85), and nowhere is that more true than it is of the Book of Mormon. When you begin to hunger and thirst after those words, you will find life in greater and greater abundance.

I find it interesting that LDS Church leaders focused three of this manual's twenty-four chapters on "scripture." Two (chapters 9 and this one) focused specifically on the Book of Mormon. Chapter 8 ("The Power of the Word") deals with LDS scripture, in general, and certainly the Bible was included. However, more emphasis in that chapter was made on the Book of Mormon.

For instance, under a section talking about "study(ing) God's word" on page 121, Benson cited Smith about how "the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, *and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts* than by any other book." But I look through the rest of the chapter and, while Bible references are quoted, I don't see anything encouraging the members to read the Bible, just the "scriptures." And most of the praise is heaped upon the Book of Mormon. Truly this is a shame.

Men may deceive each other, but God does not deceive men. Therefore, the Book of Mormon sets forth the best test for determining its truthfulness—namely, read it and then ask God if it is true [see Moroni 10:4]. …

In the chapter 9 review, we took a closer look at Moroni 10:4 and showed how this test is not biblical.

This, then, is the supreme assurance for the honest in heart—to know by personal revelation from God that the Book of Mormon is true. Millions have put it to that test and know, and increasing millions will yet know.

And how will they know? Through a feeling they have? This is not a biblical way to test truth.

Now the spirit, as well as the body, is in need of constant nourishment. Yesterday's meal is not enough to sustain today's needs. So also an infrequent reading of "the most correct of any book on earth," as Joseph Smith called it, is not enough. (History of the Church, 4:461.) Not all truths are of equal value, nor are all scriptures of the same worth. What better way to nourish the spirit than to frequently feast from the book which the Prophet Joseph Smith said would get a man "nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book"? (History of the Church, 4:461.)

As quoted in chapter 8. However, the correct method to get divine nourishment is through God's divine word, the Word of God—specifically, the Bible.

Do eternal consequences rest upon our response to this book? Yes, either to our blessing or our condemnation.

And the Christian responds that there is no condemnation for denying the authority of the Book of Mormon, which has a number of flaws.

Every Latter-day Saint should make the study of this book a lifetime pursuit. Otherwise, he is placing his soul in jeopardy and neglecting that which could give spiritual and intellectual unity to his whole life. There is a difference between a convert who is built on the rock of Christ through the Book of Mormon and stays hold on the iron rod, and one who [is] not.

A person places his soul in jeopardy for denying the words of the Bible, not the Book of Mormon.

We must flood the earth and our lives with the Book of Mormon.

We each need to get our own testimony of the Book of Mormon through the Holy Ghost. Then our testimony, coupled with the Book of Mormon, should be shared with others so that they, too, can know through the Holy Ghost of its truthfulness.

Can you imagine what would happen with an increasing number of copies of the Book of Mormon in the hands of an increasing number of missionaries who know how to use it and who have been born of God? When this happens, we will get the bounteous harvest of souls that the Lord promised.

"I have a vision of flooding the earth with the Book of Mormon."

I have a conviction: The more we teach and preach from the Book of Mormon, the more we shall please the Lord and the greater will be our power of speaking. By so doing, we shall greatly increase our converts, both within the Church and among those we proselyte. … Our commission then is to teach the principles of the gospel which are in the Bible and the Book of Mormon. "These shall be their teachings, as they shall be directed by the Spirit" (D&C 42:13).

The Book of Mormon is the instrument that God designed to "sweep the earth as with a flood, to gather out [His] elect." (Moses 7:62.) This sacred volume of scripture needs to become more central in our preaching, our teaching, and our missionary work.

… In this age of the electronic media and the mass distribution of the printed word, God will hold us accountable if we do not now move the Book of Mormon in a monumental way.

We have the Book of Mormon, we have the members, we have the missionaries, we have the resources, and the world has the need. The time is now!

My beloved brothers and sisters, we hardly fathom the power of the Book of Mormon, nor the divine role it must play, nor the extent to which it must be moved. …

I challenge all of us to prayerfully consider steps that we can personally take to bring this new witness for Christ more fully into our own lives and into a world that so desperately needs it.

I have a vision of homes alerted, of classes alive, and of pulpits aflame with the spirit of Book of Mormon messages.

I have a vision of home teachers and visiting teachers, ward and branch officers, and stake and mission leaders counseling our people out of the most correct of any book on earth—the Book of Mormon.

I have a vision of artists putting into film, drama, literature, music, and paintings great themes and great characters from the Book of Mormon.

I have a vision of thousands of missionaries going into the mission field with hundreds of passages memorized from the Book of Mormon so that they might feed the needs of a spiritually famished world.

I have a vision of the whole Church getting nearer to God by abiding by the precepts of the Book of Mormon.

Indeed, I have a vision of flooding the earth with the Book of Mormon.

I await the day when the Mormon leadership attempts to flood the earth with the Bible. Alas, I cannot see this day ever happening.

Chapter 11: Follow the Living Prophet

"The most important prophet, so far as we are concerned, is the one who is living in our day and age."

The President of the Church is the Lord's mouthpiece on the earth.

Learn to keep your eye on the prophet. He is the Lord's mouthpiece and the only man who can speak for the Lord today. Let his inspired counsel take precedence. Let his inspired words be a basis for evaluating the counsel of all lesser authorities. Then live close to the Spirit so you may know the truth of all things.

The Lord's mouthpiece and prophet on the face of the earth today received his authority through a line of prophets going back to Joseph Smith, who was ordained by Peter, James, and John, who were ordained by Christ, who was and is the head of the Church, the Creator of this earth, and the God before whom all men must stand accountable.

This Church is not being directed by the wisdom of men. I know that. The power and influence of Almighty God are directing His Church.

Mormons are told specifically to keep their eyes on their top leader, the president (also known as the prophet), whose presidency was "foreordained in the premortal life" (*Teachings of the Living Prophets Teacher Manual: Religion 333*, 13). An experience at a Utah high school seminary (a church building located near the public school where academic classes on LDS scripture are offered to Mormon students) illustrates this point.

The classroom teacher of thirty students drew two stick men on the white board and explained how the figure on the right symbolized humanity while the figure on the left stood for God the Father. Then he drew a tall wall separating the two, saying it represented the isolation suffered by all humans who, by themselves, do not have access to God. Because of mankind's rebellion, he said, the wall prohibits God from communicating with humans.

Then the teacher drew a third stick figure that stood on top of the wall. Arrows were drawn going up and down on both sides to show how it is possible in the twenty-first century to have communication take place between God and people. It was all dependent on the middle man on the wall. According to a Christian worldview, this could be a symbol of Jesus Himself! As it says in 1 Timothy 2:5, "there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." But who did the teacher claim the man on the wall represented?

He said that this figure symbolized the latter-day Mormon prophets, beginning with Joseph Smith and embodied today in the current LDS prophet. Jesus's name was never even mentioned! The message to these teenaged students is very clear.

As President of the Church, Ezra Taft Benson spoke with great love and urgency.

The living prophet tells us what we need to know, not necessarily what we want to hear.

A revealing characteristic of a true prophet is that he declares a message from God. He makes no apology for the message, nor does he fear for any social repercussions which may lead to derision and persecution.

As Benson said, a "true prophet" "declares a message from God." Yet Jesus is considered to be the prophet for Christians today. Hebrews 1:1-2 state,

> God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds.

According to Deuteronomy 13, it is possible to ascertain what this person says is true or false:

> If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, And the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; Thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for the Lord your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

And Deuteronomy 18:20-22 adds,

> But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die. And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the Lord hath not spoken? When a prophet speaketh in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him.

Mormonism teaches in *another* God, *another* Jesus, and *another* gospel. Anyone can claim to be a prophet speaking on behalf of God. But if the person's teachings are contrary to the Bible, the inspired Word of God, then he or she ought to be rejected.

Sometimes there are those who feel their earthly knowledge on a certain subject is superior to the heavenly knowledge which God gives to his prophet on the same subject. They feel the prophet must have the same earthly credentials or training which they have had before they will accept anything the prophet has to say that might contradict their earthly schooling. How much earthly schooling did Joseph Smith have? Yet he gave revelations on all kinds of subjects. … We encourage earthly knowledge in many areas, but remember if there is ever a conflict between earthly knowledge and the words of the prophet, you stand with the prophet and you'll be blessed and time will show you have done the right thing.

What Benson teaches has been objected to by some LDS apologists. One, for example, is Mormon apologist Michael R. Ash who wrote *Shaken Faith Syndrome* (FAIR, 2008). He believes that "just because a prophet has the keys to the priesthood and the authority to receive revelation from God for the direction of the Church" doesn't mean every word he speaks is "infallible, inspired, or factually accurate." Among other things, he wrote on page 22:

> The onus is upon us to determine when they speak for the Lord. If we rely solely on the revelations of the prophets, without seeking our own personal confirming revelations, we tend to tacitly accept their revelations as infallible.

He adds on page 24,

> There is more to being a member of Christ's church than just marching in step. Our goal should be to receive our own revelations and to become united with Christ.

Thus, he says, it's possible for prophets to speak on topics they just don't have the human knowledge to understand. He explains on page 25,

> Do we really want to believe that Old Testament prophets had a complete understanding of the cardiovascular system or operating laws of photons? Yet some members think that modern prophets should never make mistakes in matters of history, geology, or geography—especially if they believe such matters relate to scripture.

Then he makes this incredible statement:

> We shouldn't expect prophets (including modern-day prophets) to have a complete understanding of *all* gospel principles or all gospel-related issues, nor should be expect them to be free of prejudice, cultural bias, and traditions. (Italics in original)

In what has to be considered nothing more than just his personal opinion, Ask says he thinks very little ought to be considered true doctrines except fundamental principles such as the existence of God, Jesus as the Son of God, Joseph Smith as a prophet, the scriptures are the

words of God, and the church and his prophet are true. Everything else, he says, is nothing more than speculation. He writes on pages 33 and 34:

> While there are other true doctrines, many of the things we believe are actually *traditions, policies, practices,* and *wise counsel*. Non-doctrinal beliefs may be useful and true, but they are not *official doctrine* unless the First Presidency officially expresses them as such. (Italics in original)

Wow! In other words, he says it's not necessary to feel obligated to believe a prophet's words—even if spoken at a general conference—unless it is presented as a message from the First Presidency. (I cannot remember such an event since September 1995 when "The Family: A Procolmation" was given by Gordon B. Hinckley and his two counselors.) Benson's teaching—remember this was in print decades before Ash ever wrote his 21st century book—certainly seems to contradict Ash and others who appear to want an "out" whenever their prophets speak words with which they disagree.

… The prophet does not have to say "Thus saith the Lord" to give us scripture.

These sections come from a speech that Benson gave titled "Fourteen Fundamentals in Following the Prophet." This speech was endorsed twice at the Fall 2010 general conference. I provide the links here to save space, but I recommend checking these out if this topic interests you.

Sometimes there are those who argue about words. They might say the prophet gave us counsel but that we are not obliged to follow it unless he says it is a commandment. But the Lord says of the Prophet, "Thou shalt give heed unto all his words and commandments which he shall give unto you." (D&C 21:4.)

This sounds opposite of the counsel given by the LDS apologists Michael Ash. Who should we believe is telling the truth: a prophet (with citation in a 2014 church manual) or an LDS apologist who holds the position as "Elder"?

… The prophet tells us what we need to know, not always what we want to know.

"Thou has declared unto us hard things, more than we are able to bear," complained Nephi's brethren. But Nephi answered by saying, "The guilty taketh the truth to be hard, for it cutteth them to the very center." (1 Ne. 16:1–2.)

The question is *not* what do we want to know (or not know)? Rather, the question is, "What is true?"

Said President Harold B. Lee:

"You may not like what comes from the authority of the Church. It may conflict with your political views. It may contradict your social views. It may interfere with some of your social life. … Your safety and ours depends upon whether or not we follow. … Let's keep our eye on the President of the Church." (Conference Report, October 1970, p. 152–153.)

But it is the living prophet who really upsets the world. "Even in the Church," said President Kimball, "many are prone to garnish the sepulchres of yesterday's prophets and mentally stone the living ones." (*Instructor,* 95:257.)

Why? Because the living prophet gets at what we need to know now, and the world prefers that prophets either be dead or worry about their own affairs. …

How we respond to the words of a living prophet when he tells us what we need to know, but would rather not hear, is a test of our faithfulness. …

The learned may feel the prophet is only inspired when he agrees with them, otherwise the prophet is just giving his opinion—speaking as a man. The rich may feel they have no need to take counsel of a lowly prophet. …

… The prophet will not necessarily be popular with the world or the worldly.

As a prophet reveals the truth it divides the people. The honest in heart heed his words but the unrighteous either ignore the prophet or fight him. When the prophet points out the sins of the world, the worldly either want to close the mouth of the prophet, or else act as if the prophet didn't exist, rather than repent of their sins. Popularity is never a test of truth. Many a prophet has been killed or cast out. As we come closer to the Lord's second coming you can expect that as the people of the world become more wicked, the prophet will be less popular with them.

I agree that "popularity is never a test of truth." We shouldn't base our analysis on whether or not we like what a "prophet" is saying. Rather, as I have said, the question is bypassing popularity and determining truth, as taught by the Word of God (the Bible).

We will be blessed as we follow the living prophet.

To help you pass the crucial tests which lie ahead, I am going to give you … a grand key which, if you will honor, will crown you with God's glory and bring you out victorious in spite of Satan's fury.

… As a Church we sing the hymn, "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet" [*Hymns,* no. 19]. Here then is the grand key—Follow the prophet. …

Referring back to the stick figure model drawn on the whiteboard by an LDS seminary teacher, I ask: Is there one mediator between God and man? If so, who is he? According to 1 Timothy 2:5, it's Jesus. In Mormonism, however, a human called a prophet is needed to serve as the mediator. The role of Jesus seems to be secondary. If what a human says is contrary to what the Word of God teaches, then I say, reject it!

… The prophet is the only man who speaks for the Lord in everything.

What a dangerous presupposition to have! The Bible says "test everything" (1 Thess. 5:21). Consider Acts 17:11-12 in its reference to the Bereans:

> These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so. Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few.

In this passage the Bereans checked the apostle Paul's message by "searching the scriptures daily." I would think that a Mormon prophet today would be irritated if a member questioned the leader's teaching by referencing the Bible. However, Paul thought highly of those employing this tactic! Luke even calls the Bereans "more noble" than those who accepted the gospel in Thessalonica without little effort to check out the teaching. Finally, 1 John 4:1 says,

> Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.

Since these prophets are trying their best to produce counterfeit currency—making it look as close to the original as possible—we must be aware of these wolves who craftily dress up in the clothing of innocent sheep in order to be better accepted.

In section 132 verse 7 of the Doctrine and Covenants the Lord speaks of the prophet—the president—and says:

"There is never but one on the earth at a time on whom this power and the keys of this priesthood are conferred."

Then in section 21 verses 4–6, the Lord states:

"Wherefore, meaning the church, thou shalt give heed unto all his words and commandments which he shall give unto you as he receiveth them, walking in all holiness before me;

"For his word ye shall receive, as if from mine own mouth, in all patience and faith.

"For by doing these things the gates of hell shall not prevail against you."

Doctrine and Covenants is not part of the Christian's scripture. How dangerous it is for a person to "give heed unto all his words and commandments" when the Bible might be contradicted.

The prophet will never lead the Church astray.

President Wilford Woodruff stated: "I say to Israel, The Lord will never permit me or any other man who stands as president of the Church to lead you astray. It is not in the program. It is not in the mind of God" [see *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Wilford Woodruff* (2004), 199].

President Marion G. Romney tells of this incident which happened to him:

"I remember years ago when I was a bishop I had President Heber J. Grant talk to our ward. After the meeting I drove him home. … Standing by me, he put his arm over my shoulder and said: 'My boy, you always keep your eye on the President of the Church and if he ever tells you to do anything, and it is wrong, and you do it, the Lord will bless you for it.' Then with a twinkle in his eye, he said, 'But you don't need to worry. The Lord will never let his mouthpiece lead the people astray.'" (Conference Report, October 1960, p. 78.)

This might sound like a cute story, but it's not. For example, children should be made aware that, when it comes to their safety (including their sexuality) every precaution ought to be made. Even relatives can deceive! Anyone who says, "Don't worry, I'll never lead you astray" ought to cause warning flags. It begs the question, "Why would this person say that?"

I have even told my Bible students to check everything I teach. If what I say is contrary to the Bible, I tell them they are obligated to point out my error. I would hope that every pastor would have the same attitude. I would rather side with caution than advocate accepting a person's word on any topic, no matter how "expert" he or she is supposed to be. If their word is contrary to the Bible, then it must be rejected!

The story is told how Brigham Young, driving through a community, saw a man building a house and simply told him to double the thickness of his walls. Accepting President Young as a prophet, the man changed his plans and doubled the walls. Shortly afterward a flood came through that town, resulting in much destruction, but this man's walls stood. While putting the roof on his house, he was heard singing, "We thank thee, O God, for a prophet!"

Whenever someone begins by saying, "The story is told," I must wonder if this is one of those old wife's tales. But let's say this story is true. Would this prove Brigham Young is a true prophet? Why is it that Mormons today don't hold to some of Young's doctrinal teachings, including Adam as God or his teaching that there were inhabitants on the sun? Check out the links for yourself.

As members of the Church we have some close quarters to pass through if we are going to get home safely. We will be given a chance to choose between conflicting counsel given by some. That's why we must learn—and the sooner we learn, the better—to keep our eye on the Prophet, the President of the Church.

My recommendation is to take Brigham Young's words seriously when he said,

> Take up the Bible, compare the religion of the Latter-day Saints with it, and see if it will stand the test. (*Discourses of Brigham Young*, p. 126).

Chapter 12: Seek the Spirit in all you do

"We must remain open and sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Ghost in all aspects of our lives."

"How do we obtain the Spirit? 'By the prayer of faith,' says the Lord."

We should strive for the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost all the days of our lives.

These statements, at face value, are ones with which I can agree. However, as the rest of this review will attest, there are differences in the perspectives held between Evangelical Christians and Latter-day Saints.

One sure way we can determine whether we are on the strait and narrow path is that we will possess the Spirit of the Lord in our lives.

According to Benson, having the Holy Ghost requires walking the "strait and narrow path." If you're not walking down this road, the idea is that you must not have the Holy Ghost. Yet there are times when a Christian may not be *filled* with the Spirit yet not lose the forgiveness given by God. Mormonism is all about keeping commandments and doing the impossible. If that is the case, nobody can know that they have God in their lives.

Having the Holy Ghost brings forth certain fruits.

The Apostle Paul said that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, [and] temperance." (Gal. 5:22–23.)

The most important thing in our lives is the Spirit. I have always felt that. We must remain open and sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Ghost in all aspects of our lives. … These promptings most often come when we are not under the pressure of appointments and when we are not caught up in the worries of day-to-day life.

Spirituality—being in tune with the Spirit of the Lord—is the greatest need we all have. We should strive for the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost all the days of our lives. When we have the Spirit, we will love to serve, we will love the Lord, and we will love those with whom we serve, and those whom we serve.

I agree in principle with the importance of the fruit of the Spirit. As a Christian believer, I strive for love, joy, peace, patience, etc. My problem, however, is that Mormonism requires the "fruit" (worthiness) as a prerequisite for having the Holy Ghost, not just "proof" of a person's salvation. This idea runs contrary to what the Bible teaches.

Several years after Joseph Smith was martyred, he appeared to President Brigham Young. Hear his message:

"Tell the people to be humble and faithful, and be sure to keep the spirit of the Lord and it will lead them right. Be careful and not turn away the small still voice; it will teach you what to do and where to go; it will yield the fruits of the kingdom. Tell the brethren to keep their hearts open to conviction, so that when the Holy Ghost comes to them, their hearts will be ready to receive it." …

Shouldn't we be bothered that Joseph Smith, a man who lived and then died as a human being, makes an appearance to his succeeding president? First of all, it is necessary to trust Brigham Young to believe such an event even took place. There were no witnesses. But second, what biblical support do we have that deceased humans can communicate with the living? The only reference I can come up with the story involves Saul and the Witch of Endor (1 Samuel 28), and Saul lost his life for doing what he had commanded the people not to do.

This latter-day work is spiritual. It takes spirituality to comprehend it, to love it, and to discern it. Therefore seek the Spirit in all you do. Keep it with you continually. That is our challenge.

We live in a very wicked world. We are surrounded with propaganda that evil is good and good is evil. False teachings abound that affect us. Almost everything that is wholesome, good, pure, uplifting, and strengthening is being challenged as never before.

I have to agree, we do live in a world that seems to celebrate the immorally wrong choices. Christians are said to be "in" the world but are not "of" the world (John 17:16). I agree too that we should seek the Spirit. But should we seek it according to Benson and the Mormon religion? This is where we part ways.

One reason we are on this earth is to discern between truth and error. This discernment comes by the Holy Ghost, not just our intellectual faculties.

This is an obvious slap at apologetics and testing everything, as so commanded in 1 Thessalonians 5:21. Yet verse after verse can be shown how believers shouldn't just drink the Kool-Aid but "discern between truth and error." We must do proper research, and if it is disagreeable to a correct reading of the Bible, we should reject anyone teaching contrary to the truth. In Acts 17:11, we are told how the Bereans "were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so." Paul is the one who preached the gospel to these people; if anyone should be believed, he should! Yet these Bereans were honored for taking his words and then comparing them to the Old Testament scriptures to see if what they were being taught was true. Consider the following passages to support such a notion:

> Matthew 7:15: “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.”
>
> Matthew 24:24: ““For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect. “
>
> 1 John 4:1: “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.”

Discernment comes through our intellectual faculties—brains given to us by God—in order to determine if what is being taught is the real deal. Faith is important as well, don’t get me wrong. But if the evidence goes against a particular teacher or the religion as a whole, the wise man should run away as fast as he can.

When we earnestly and honestly seek for the truth, this beautiful promise finds fulfillment: “God shall give unto you knowledge by his Holy Spirit, yea, by the unspeakable gift of the Holy Ghost.” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:26)

If we are humble and sensitive, the Lord will prompt us through our feelings.

The problem with feelings is that they too often mislead us. At one time or another, all of us—Mormons included—have been fooled by our feelings, no matter how sincere we might have been. For example, Mormons believe that marriage is not only for life but also for eternity. Should it be assumed that the many LDS couples who are divorced did not pray about their relationships beforehand?

Surely knowing information about another person that could have exposed potential behavior problems—such as drug addiction, sex addiction, pornography issues, inward apathy to God, or repressed anger—would have helped with making a more informed decision. Yet how many Mormons must have “felt” God’s approval in relationships that were tragically doomed from the beginning?

Pray to Heavenly Father to bless you with His Spirit at all times. We often call the Spirit the Holy Ghost. … The Holy Ghost helps you to choose the right. The Holy Ghost will protect you from evil. He whispers to you in a still, small voice to do right. When you *do* good, you *feel*good, and that is the Holy Ghost speaking to you. The Holy Ghost is a wonderful companion. He is *always* there to help you.

Ponder matters that you do not understand. As the Lord commanded Oliver Cowdery: “Study it out in your mind; then … ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall *feel* that it is right.” (D&C 9:8, italics added.)

Did you notice that last phrase? "You shall *feel* that it is right."

We hear the words of the Lord most often by a feeling. If we are humble and sensitive, the Lord will prompt us through our feelings. That is why spiritual promptings move us on occasion to great joy, sometimes to tears. Many times my emotions have been made tender and my feelings very sensitive when touched by the Spirit.

The Bible makes it very clear that subjective feelings can be deceptive. Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" Proverbs 14:12 warns, "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death," while Proverbs 28:26 adds that only fools trust in their heart. Because everyone is a fallen and sinful creature, it is possible to be swayed by emotions and desires. To believe something is true merely because one feels it to be true is no guarantee of truth. Jesus commanded His followers in Mark 12:30 to love God "with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength."

Paul explained in 2 Timothy 2:15 that the believer must make the effort to study in order to correctly understand truth. In the next chapter (3:16–17), he added that all Scripture given by inspiration of God is "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" so that the man or woman of God might be competent and equipped to do good works. Christians are commanded in 1 Thessalonians 5:21 to "prove all things; hold fast that which is good." While it is true that faith does involve believing things that can't be proven, it is foolishness to believe something that has already been disproven. If the Bible disproves a spiritual truth claim, it must be rejected.

The Holy Ghost causes our feelings to be more tender. We feel more charitable and compassionate with each other. We are more calm in our relationships. We have a greater capacity to love each other. People want to be around us because our very countenances radiate the influence of the Spirit. We are more godly in our character. As a result, we become increasingly more sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Ghost and thus able to comprehend spiritual things more clearly.

Wow, isn't it amazing how trusting in feelings can somehow make a person more: 1) tender; 2) charitable and compassionate; 3) calm; 4) able to love; 5) desired for people to be around. This is total hogwash, pardon the French. A person who trusts primarily in his or her feelings does *not* comprehend spiritual things more clearly. Instead, that person believes whatever he or she wants to believe because it *feels* good. It might feel good to eat a brownie with arsenic in it, but one's feelings does not cause the poison to go away.

To the Mormon who is reading this, I already provided biblical reasons why it is crucial to beware of what we ingest when it comes to spiritual issues. In response, I would ask you to

provide a biblical passage or two that you believe suggests the importance of checking our brains at the door and accepting our feelings at face value.

We obtain the Spirit through sincere prayer and fasting.

How do we obtain the Spirit? "By the prayer of faith," says the Lord [D&C 42:14]. Therefore, we must pray with sincerity and real intent. We must pray for increased faith and pray for the Spirit to accompany our teaching. We should ask the Lord for forgiveness.

If you want to get the spirit of your office and calling … try fasting for a period. I don't mean just missing one meal, then eating twice as much the next meal. I mean really fasting, and praying during that period. It will do more to give you the real spirit of your office and calling and permit the Spirit to operate through you than anything I know.

Prayer and fasting are important to the Evangelical Christian, no doubt. At the same time, what good are prayer and fasting activities if the religion continues to be based on the false teachings of a religious organization? If the biblical teachings contradict the religion and its leaders, then no amount of prayer and fasting can make the errors go away.

Daily scripture study, including meditation on passages of scripture, invites the Spirit.

OK, now we're on to something. Study scripture! But wait. Didn't Benson earlier say we should be wary of our intellect? So if reading and then reflecting on these passages requires our brains, not so much our faith, then isn't his previous teaching contradictory?

Search the scriptures diligently in personal study every day. Daily scripture study invites the Spirit.

Take time to meditate. Meditation on a passage of scripture—James 1:5—led a young boy into a grove of trees to commune with his Heavenly Father. That is what opened the heavens in this dispensation.

Ahh, James 1:5, the verse supposedly used by Joseph Smith to pray about which church was true. This verse is commonly used along with Moroni 10:4 as encouragement to pray about the Book of Mormon.

If praying about the Book of Mormon is the means for finding truth, shouldn't this test also apply to other religious books? It is curious how very few Mormons have taken the time and effort to read (and pray about) the scriptures of other religions. Using the rationale that people should pray about Mormonism's scripture, why shouldn't every religion's scriptures—such as the Qu'ran (Islam), the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita (Hinduism), and the Tripitaka (Buddhism)—also be read and contemplated through prayer?

How can the Mormon know the accuracy of Mormonism until he or she personally tests all religions in this way? Though we should most certainly use prayer to guide us in our search for truth, it should not be the only litmus test. Hopefully, prayer will lead us to the information we need in order to make an informed and proper decision.

And one more thing. If we're supposed to receive this understanding by reading the Book of Mormon, why won't reading part of it do? (In other words, what is so special about reading the whole book?) In fact, the missionaries usually bring up Moroni 10:4 at the end of their scripture before the potential convert ever has a chance to read it. It involves the rest of the story. According to Moroni 10:4, what seems to be most important is a person's intent and sincerity. So why not just pray to God about the Book of Mormon and skip reading it? If it's true, won't God show it to be true in the same manner?

The test is disingenuous. This is because the Book of Mormon does not teach the fundamental points of the Mormon religion…in fact, it even seems to contradict the church in many points. The test would seem to be better served by reading the Doctrine and Covenants, for example, which contains far more current teaching of Mormonism than anything found in the Book of Mormon. For more, see here.

Meditation on a passage of scripture from the book of John in the New Testament brought forth the great revelation on the three degrees of glory [see John 5:29;D&C 76].

At least this is what Joseph Smith claimed. It's fascinating how this teaching is certainly not found in either the Bible or, for that matter, the Book of Mormon. (There we go again!)

Meditation on another passage of scripture from the Epistle of Peter opened the heavens to President Joseph F. Smith, and he saw the spirit world. That revelation, known as the Vision of the Redemption of the Dead, is now a part of the Doctrine and Covenants [see 1 Peter 3:18–20; 4:6; D&C 138].

These biblical passages are taken out of context to make them say something the apostle never intended. For more on this issue, see 1 Peter 3 and 1 Peter 4.

Ponder the significance of the responsibility the Lord has given to us. The Lord has counseled, "Let the solemnities of eternity rest upon your minds." (D&C 43:34.) You cannot do that when your minds are preoccupied with the cares of the world.

Read and study the scriptures. The scriptures should be studied in the home with fathers and mothers taking the lead and setting the example. The scriptures are to be comprehended by the power of the Holy Ghost, for the Lord has given this promise to His faithful and obedient: "Thou mayest know the mysteries and peaceable things." (D&C 42:61.)

The more familiar you are with the scriptures, the closer you become to the mind and will of the Lord and the closer you become as husband and wife and children. You will find that by reading the scriptures the truths of eternity will rest on your minds.

Of course, when Benson refers to the "scriptures," he means the Bible along with the three other unique LDS "scriptures." Instead of relying on these and having to put complete trust in Joseph Smith, I suggest doing what second President Brigham Young said:

> Take up the Bible; compare the religion of the Latter-day Saints with it, and see if it will stand the test (*Discourses of Brigham Young*, p. 126)

The Holy Ghost will abide with us as we honor, respect, and obey God's laws.

According to Ezra Taft Benson and the Mormon religion, there can be no assurance of salvation. If you obey the laws, the Holy Spirit is with you. Disobey and he is far away. What a hopeless predicament for any person who has blood pumping through his or her veins!

We have been taught that the Spirit will not dwell in unclean tabernacles [see Helaman 4:24]. Therefore, one of our first priorities is to make sure our own personal lives are in order.

Our first priority ought to be to surrender our lives to God. We have nothing to bring to the table. When we understand that fact, then Jesus can do the necessary surgery and create a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17).

Let me talk about obedience. You're learning now to keep all the commandments of the Lord. As you do so, you will have His Spirit to be with you. You'll feel good about yourselves. You can't *do* wrong and *feel* right. It's impossible!

Many Mormons interpret their religion's mantra of "obey, obey, obey" to mean they need to attain perfection. Often Matthew 5:48 ("be ye perfect") is referenced. Referring to this topic, Christian theologians Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes write,

This verse does not mean human beings can actually become perfect in this life. . . . The context of this verse is that the Jewish leaders had taught that we should love those near and dear to us (Lev. 19:18), but hate our enemies. Jesus, however, said we should love even our enemies. After all, Jesus said, God's love extends to all people (Matt. 5:45).

And since God is our righteous standard, we should seek to be as he is in this regard. We are to be "perfect" (or "complete") in loving others as he is perfect. Furthermore, the Bible certainly does not give support to the idea that we can actually attain sinless perfection in this life, for all of us are fallen and sin continually (1 John 1:8). The good news is that by trusting in Jesus, his

perfection becomes ours: "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Heb. 10:14 nasb). (*When Cultists Ask*, pp. 100-101)

In some ways there is a parallel between Mormons who think they only need more time to make things right and the servant in Jesus' story in Matthew 18:23–27. In this passage Jesus tells of a servant who owed the king an insurmountable debt of ten thousand talents. The servant pleaded with the king to have patience with him. Somehow, he thought having more time would solve his problem. Thankfully for him, the king had compassion and canceled the debt. In Luke 7:36–50, Jesus forgave a woman of her sins for no other reason than that she was worshipping Him. She was not required to go through a repentance process.

Understandably, some Mormons feel a great amount of anxiety in not knowing whether they have done enough to secure their forgiveness. This could be because they have blurred the lines between what justifies a person (or makes them right) with God and what sanctifies (or sets them apart) unto God. This dilemma was explained in a sermon by Anglican bishop J. C. Ryle (1816–1900):

I am persuaded that one great cause of the darkness and uncomfortable feelings of many well-meaning people in the matter of religion is their habit of confounding, and not distinguishing, justification and sanctification. It can never be too strongly impressed on our minds that they are two separate things. No doubt they cannot be divided, and everyone that is a partaker of either is a partaker of both. But never, never ought they to be confounded, and never ought the distinction between them to be forgotten.

Christians are justified, or made right with God, because of what Jesus did on the cross (cf. Rom. 9:16; Eph. 2:8–10; Titus 3:4–7). Princeton theologian Benjamin B. Warfield (1851–1921) succinctly summed up this incredible act when he said,

> Justification by Faith, we see, is not to be set in contradiction to justification by Works. It is set in contradiction only to justification by our Own Works. It is justification by Christ's Works. ("Justification by Faith, Out of Date?" *The Christian Irishman*, Dublin, May 1911. p. 71).

Christians can be confident of their forgiveness because it has nothing to do with their personal merit or performance. The same cannot be said for those who are hoping to gain their justification through their good works.

The temporal promise for obedience [to the Word of Wisdom] is: They "shall receive health in their navel and marrow to their bones; … [they] shall run and not be weary, and shall walk and not faint." (D&C 89:18, 20.) I have always felt, however, that the greater blessing of obedience to the Word of Wisdom and all other commandments is spiritual. Listen to the spiritual promise:

"All saints who remember to keep and do these sayings, walking in obedience *to the commandments,* … shall find wisdom and great treasures of knowledge, even hidden treasures." (D&C 89:18, 19; italics added.)

In Mormonism, it's all about keeping the commandments. Regarding this paragraph by Benson, I'm not sure how observing dietary law is a spiritual act of worship. Colossians 2:16-23 (ESV) seem to deal directly with this type of worldview:

> 16 Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. 17 These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. 18 Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, 19 and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.
>
> 20 If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— 21 "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" 22 (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? 23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

Some have thought this promise was contingent on just keeping the provisions of the Word of Wisdom. But you will notice we must walk in obedience to *all* the commandments. Then we shall receive specific spiritual promises. This means we must obey the law of tithing, keep the Sabbath day holy, keep morally clean and chaste, and obey all other commandments.

Living the commandments of God is a condition of worthiness for entrance into the House of the Lord. There wisdom and "great treasures of knowledge" are given that relate to our happiness in this life and joy throughout eternity. …

I do not believe that a member of the Church can have an active, vibrant testimony of the gospel without keeping the commandments. A testimony is to have current inspiration to know the work is true, not something we receive only once. The Holy Ghost abides with those who honor, respect, and obey God's laws. And it is that Spirit which gives inspiration to the individual. Humbly I testify to the reality of this promise.

Ahh, once more, I can hear the familiar refrain:

> Keep the commandments, keep the commandments,

> You can know you are a child of God by how you keep the commandments.
>
> Keep them all, keep them all, until the day you are ready to leave.
>
> And then maybe, just maybe, you have a chance with God to cleave.

Salvation according to Mormonism cannot be done without consistent commandment keeping. Latter-day Saint, just how are you doing at that?

- For more information, see this article on Celestial Law and Covenants.
- What do I believe a person must do to receive eternal life? Click here.

Chapter 13: Priceless Blessings of the House of the Lord

"It is in the temples that we obtain God's greatest blessings pertaining to eternal life. Temples are really the gateways to heaven."

From the very beginning, we get a hint of what is to come:

> "Temples are really the gateway to heaven."

What an incredible statement. This is a place that Mormons believe they must attend and do work so they can have a chance to enter the celestial kingdom. As we will discover in this chapter, temples are not necessary for the salvation of Christians. In fact, the very idea of a temple post-apostolic era is not biblical.

Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson

Temples are symbols of all we hold dear.

To me, the cross—something scorned in Mormonism—has a much clearer and spiritually significant symbol. First Corinthians 1:18 says, "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." This is a much more powerful symbol than the temple.

The temple is the nearest place to heaven on mortal earth.

"The nearest place to heaven"? Seriously. Perhaps someone could have made this claim before the time of Jesus, but isn't being in the presence of Jesus and the Holy Spirit the nearest place to heaven.

[The] temple will be a light to all in [the] area—a symbol of all we hold dear.

John 8:12 says, "Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'"

The temple is an ever-present reminder that God intends the family to be eternal.

In biblical days the temple was an "ever-present reminder" that people were sinners in need of forgiveness. The sacrifice of animals temporarily atoned for the sins of people in light of the forgiveness that would eventually become available with the New Covenant. Jesus fulfilled the temple by becoming a priest and having his blood shed for His people's sins, according to the book of Hebrews. For example:

1. *Jesus is our high priest (4:14-5:10)*
2. *Jesus is in the order of Melchizedek (7)*
3. *Jesus is the priest of a higher covenant (8)*
4. *There is redemption through the blood of Christ (9:11-28)*
5. *Christ's sacrifice is once for all (10:1-18)*

[The temple is] a constant, visible symbol that God has not left man to grope in darkness. It is a place of revelation. Though we live in a fallen world—a wicked world—holy places are set apart and consecrated so that worthy men and women can learn the order of heaven and obey God's will.

The temple certainly served a purpose before Christ. Today the temple is not needed because the purpose of the temple has been fulfilled, as recorded in the book of Hebrews.

May [the temple] be a constant reminder that life is eternal and that covenants made by us in mortality can be everlasting.

We need temple ordinances and covenants in order to enter into the fulness of the priesthood and prepare to regain God's presence.

Before a Mormon can go into a temple, he or she must be deemed "worthy." The *Gospel Principles* church manual says,

> Before we can go to the temple, we must be active, worthy members of the Church for at least one year. Men must hold the Melchizedek Priesthood. We must be interviewed by the branch president or bishop. If he finds us worthy, he will give us a temple recommend. If we are not worthy, he will counsel with us and help us set goals to become worthy to go to the temple.

The same manual claims that "the Church today teaches the same principles and performs the same ordinances as were performed in the days of Jesus"(p. 98). However, it also quotes the Book of Mormon (3 Nephi 19:19–20) to show that "sacrifice of blood was ended" after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70 and that God now "requires a different kind of offering." So while the offering of blood sacrifices of animals was one of the main functions of biblical priests, the manual states that committed followers of God should become, as Paul said in Romans 12:1, "living sacrifices." And it adds, "If we are to be a living sacrifice, we must be willing to give everything we have for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" (p. 151).

If the LDS religion is truly a restoration of biblical Christianity, it would make sense that today's temple rites should be similar to what took place in ancient Israel. Yet there are many differences, including the following:

• The Jews recognized only one temple located in Jerusalem, while the LDS Church has dozens of temples scattered across the globe.

• The primary activity at the Jerusalem temple was the sacrifice of animals as atonement for the sins of the people. Worshippers in ancient Israel went to the temple with an attitude of unworthiness before an all-holy God. They approached His temple with humility as they looked to have their sins covered. In stark contrast, Mormons enter their temples with a positive sense of worthiness. A person cannot enter a Mormon temple (after it is dedicated) unless he or she is considered "worthy."

• The priests officiating in the Jerusalem temple had to be from the tribe of Levi and the family of Aaron. This was commanded in Numbers 3:6–10. The LDS Church ignores such commands and allows its "temple-worthy" members who have no such background to officiate in its temples.

• Wedding ceremonies did not take place in the Jerusalem temple, while this is a common practice in modern LDS temples.

• While there were no marriages performed in the Jerusalem temple, many Mormon families have been "sealed" for time and eternity in LDS temples.

• While it was not a practice ever performed in the Jerusalem temple, proxy baptism for the dead by living members of the LDS Church is the most common activity in Mormon temples.

If Benson is correct and the temple is vital for today, it seems strange that there are so many differences between the temple from biblical times and the temple as set up by the Mormon Church.

When our Heavenly Father placed Adam and Eve on this earth, He did so with the purpose in mind of teaching them how to regain His presence. Our Father promised a Savior to redeem them from their fallen condition. He gave to them the plan of salvation and told them to teach their children faith in Jesus Christ and repentance. Further, Adam and his posterity were commanded by God to be baptized, to receive the Holy Ghost, and to enter into the order of the Son of God.

First of all, there is no biblical evidence that God told Adam and Eve about "a Savior" or that their children should have faith in Jesus Christ, repentance, baptism, receiving of the Holy Ghost, and the "order of the Son of God." All of these terms are New Testament vocabulary. There is absolutely no evidence that Adam and Eve knew about any of these things. It is merely an argument from silence on Benson's part to say they did.

To enter into the order of the Son of God is the equivalent today of entering into the fullness of the Melchizedek Priesthood, which is only received in the house of the Lord.

Melchizedek came well after Adam and Eve, so they had never even heard of this name or the priesthood supposedly attributed to him. They also had no knowledge of any temple of God.

Because Adam and Eve had complied with these requirements, God said to them, "Thou art after the order of him who was without beginning of days or end of years, from all eternity to all eternity." (Moses 6:67.)

Again, even if the book of Moses ought to be considered a true scriptural text (and Christians don't hold this as true), this statement by God to Adam and Eve would have been very confusing to them. They wouldn't have known what God was trying to say.

Three years before Adam's death, a great event occurred. He took his son Seth, his grandson Enos, and other high priests who were his direct-line descendants, with others of his righteous posterity, into a valley called Adam-ondi-Ahman. There Adam gave to these righteous descendants his last blessing.

What many Mormons don't know is that, according to Mormonism, Adam-ondi-Ahman supposedly existed in modern-day Missouri. At least that is the teaching of Joseph Smith. For more information on this topic, click here.

The Lord then appeared to them [see D&C 107:53–56]. …

This is true according to Joseph Smith and "latter-day revelation." Yet how can we know, for sure, that Smith really wrote down what God commanded. In fact, it is necessary to trust in Smith as much as Muslims must trust in Muhammad, FLDS members must trust in Warren Jeffs, and a thousand people who committed suicide in the jungles of Guyana in 1978 must have trusted in Jim Jones. Perhaps someone is offended by such comparisons. Yet the point is very clear that, when you wander away from God's Word, it's easy to have someone deceive you.

How did Adam bring his descendants into the presence of the Lord?

The answer: Adam and his descendants entered into the priesthood order of God. Today we would say they went to the House of the Lord and received their blessings.

This makes absolutely no sense at all. The priesthood did not come into existence until it was established by God through Aaron, Moses' brother. Check out this blog to see how the Old Testament priests were set apart for God.

The order of priesthood spoken of in the scriptures is sometimes referred to as the patriarchal order because it came down from father to son. But this order is otherwise described in modern revelation as an order of family government where a man and woman enter into a covenant with God—just as did Adam and Eve—to be sealed for eternity, to have posterity, and to do the will and work of God throughout their mortality.

There is no scriptural support for such a view. It is entirely made up by Ezra Taft Benson.

If a couple are true to their covenants, they are entitled to the blessing of the highest degree of the celestial kingdom. These covenants today can only be entered into by going to the House of the Lord.

"Celestial marriages" of LDS couples for "time and eternity" take place in the temples. This is an important teaching, since "only in the temple can we be sealed together forever as families"(*Gospel Principles*, p. 98). At the October 2008 general conference, Apostle Russell M. Nelson said,

> To qualify for eternal life, we must make an eternal and everlasting covenant with our Heavenly Father. This means that a temple marriage is not only between husband and wife; it embraces a partnership with God (*Ensign*, November 2008, p. 93).

Marriages performed outside of the temple are considered binding only "until death." *Gospel Principles* states,

> Only in the temple can we be sealed together forever as families. Marriage in the temple joins a man and woman as husband and wife eternally if they honor their covenants. Baptism and all other ordinances prepare us for this sacred event. When a man and woman are married in the temple, their children who are born thereafter also become part of their eternal family. (p. 235)

Children born to a couple married in the temple are automatically "sealed" (known as "born in the covenant") to their parents for eternity. Those couples not married in the temple will not only lose the right to be together after death, but they have no "claim upon their children, for they have not been born under the covenant of eternal marriage" (LeGrand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, p. 229).

Those not born "under the covenant" of celestial marriage must have their families sealed in a separate temple ceremony. President Howard W. Hunter wrote:

> If children are born before the wife is sealed to her husband, there is a temple sealing ordinance that can seal these children to their parents for eternity, and so it is that children can be sealed vicariously to parents who have passed away (*Ensign*, February 1995, p. 2).

Although continued good works are essential, Mormonism teaches that a person must be married in the temple to have a chance at exaltation. Nelson said,

> On occasion, I read in a newspaper obituary of an expectation that a recent death has reunited that person with a deceased spouse, when, in fact, they did *not* choose the eternal option. Instead, they opted for a marriage that was valid only as long as they both should live. Heavenly Father has offered them a supernatural gift, but they refused it. And in rejecting the gift, they rejected the Giver of the gift (*Ensign*, November 2008, p. 93).

Apostle Dallin H. Oaks agreed, saying,

> Under the great plan of the living Creator, the mission of His Church is to help us achieve exaltation in the celestial kingdom, and that can be accomplished only through an eternal marriage between a man and a woman (*Ensign*, January 2011, pp. 25-26).

It is believed that there is a danger in "delaying marriage" since, as Kimball explained, "all normal people should plan their lives to include a proper temple marriage in their early life and to multiply and have their families in the years of their early maturity" (T*eachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball*, p. 195).

However, the Mormon view does not sit well with biblical teaching. For example, in an account given in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus was approached by members of the Sadducees, the Jewish religious party that did not believe in a bodily resurrection from the dead (Matt. 22:23–33; Mark 12:18–27; Luke 20:27–38).

Trying to trick Him, these leaders presented what appears to be a hypothetical situation involving seven brothers. When the oldest brother died, he left a wife and no children. According to the Mosaic law, the next oldest unmarried brother took the woman for his wife. However, the second brother died, as did the third through seventh brothers. Before they died, each of them had married the oldest brother's wife, making her a widow seven times over.

In Mark 12:23 they asked, "In the resurrection, when they rise again, whose wife will she be? For the seven had her as wife." Jesus chastised His inquisitors in verse 24, saying they did not know the Scriptures. Verse 25 reads, "For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven."

At face value and as it has been historically interpreted, Jesus appears to be saying that heaven will be much different from life as it is known on earth. While the gifts of sex and procreation are important parts of the earthly life, these will not be a part of the afterlife. The joys in store for the believer are incredibly more magnificent than the temporary pleasure of sexual or familial fulfillment. In addition, there will be no need to procreate in heaven. Thus, while it appears we

will be able to recognize fellow believers in heaven, there is no indication from the Bible that we will be eternally paired with a particular mate. Historically, Christians view all believers as part of God's great family rather than millions of smaller groups. However, Mormon leaders have interpreted this passage quite differently than the historic Christian view.

Saying that this was not "the Lord's final word on the subject," David H. Yarn Jr., a former BYU professor of philosophy and religion, said, "The Lord did not say there would be no people in the married state in the resurrection but that there would be no marriages made in the resurrection" (*A Sure Foundation*, p. 115). Some Mormon leaders have read their own interpretations into this passage, explaining that the fictional wife in the parable had been eternally sealed to the first husband.

While these explanations may sound good to a Mormon audience that cherishes the institution of marriage, the ability to read between the lines of Jesus's teaching does not make a doctrine true. How many people would, on reading this Synoptic Gospel account alone in conjunction with the teachings of the Bible, exclaim, "Here's evidence for the biblical principle of eternal marriage!"? Rather than supporting the view of eternal marriage, Jesus explained that the institution of marriage was for this life only and not the life to come. To assume anything more is biblically and exegetically unsound.

Adam followed this order and brought his posterity into the presence of God. …

… This order of priesthood can only be entered into when we comply with all the commandments of God and seek the blessings of the fathers as did Abraham [see Abraham 1:1–3] by going to our Father's house. They are received in no other place on this earth!

… Go to the temple—our Father's house—to receive the blessings of your fathers that you may be entitled to the highest blessings of the priesthood. "For without this no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live." (D&C 84:22.)

To suggest that "no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live" without going to the temple is an idea that has no biblical precedence. If this were so important, why doesn't Jesus talk about the importance of attending the temple? I don't remember one time where he suggested temple work as necessary. Neither does Paul, Peter, nor any other New Testament author.

Our Father's house is a house of order. We go to His house to enter into that order of priesthood which will entitle us to all that the Father hath, if we are faithful.

Again, only those from the line of Aaron can "enter into that order of priesthood." Most Mormons I have met don't believe they come from Aaron. How can this be reconciled?

Through temple ordinances and covenants, we can receive protection and God's greatest blessings pertaining to eternal life.

Let's get this straight. We "receive protection" and "God's greatest blessings" through temple ordinances and covenants. Yet the ordinances have absolutely nothing to do with temple ordinances of biblical days. (If so, where does all the blood from the sacrifices go? Does OSHA know about this practice?) As far as covenants, aren't these promises a Mormon makes to do the right things?

There are implications in making covenants with God. In a straightforward address given in the*Ensign* magazine titled "Understanding our Covenants with God," readers were told:

> A covenant is a two-way promise, the conditions of which are set by God. When we enter into a covenant with God, we promise to keep those conditions. He promises us certain blessings in return. When we receive these saving ordinances and keep the associated covenants, the Atonement of Jesus Christ becomes effective in our lives, and we can receive the great blessing God can give us—eternal life (see D&C 14:7). Because keeping our covenants is essential to our happiness now and to eventually receiving eternal life, it is important to understand what we have promised our Heavenly Father (July 2013).

A church manual reports,

> Receiving ordinances and keeping covenants are essential to Heavenly Father's plan. The scriptures often refer to His people as a "covenant people." The Lord's blessings exceed our mortal expectations. To live in the presence of our Heavenly Father, we must receive all of the necessary ordinances and keep all of the required covenants. (*The Gospel and the Productive Life Student Manual 150*, p. 98).

Some sacrament promises will always be broken.

The blessings of the house of the Lord are eternal. They are of the highest importance to us because it is in the temples that we obtain God's greatest blessings pertaining to eternal life. Temples are really the gateways to heaven.

Funny, I have always thought Jesus was the "gateway to heaven," for He said in John 10:9, "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture" (NIV).

The Lord's desire is for every adult man and woman in the Church to receive the ordinances of the temple. This means that they are to be endowed and that all married couples are to be sealed for eternity. These ordinances provide a protection and blessing to their marriage. Their children

also are blessed to be born in the covenant. Birth in the covenant entitles those children to a birthright blessing which guarantees them eternal parentage regardless of what happens to the parents, so long as the children remain worthy of the blessings.

For those Mormons who fully expect to have their children with them in the celestial kingdom, consider this telling statement: "so long as the children remain worthy of the blessings." In other words, family members cannot attain the celestial kingdom on the coattails of their relatives. How many families do you know where everyone in the family is living according to the celestial law?

Is it not significant to you that today the Saints are scattered over the face of the world and, in their scattered situation, temples are being provided for them? By the ordinances that they receive in holy places, they will be armed with righteousness and endowed with the power of God in great measure.

In the Bible, only one temple was needed, which was the one in Jerusalem. Any other temple, including the one in Samaria, were criticized as not being authentic. So where does God reside? In one temple? Or, as Mormonism teaches, in one of the more than 140 around the world?

There is a power associated with the ordinances of heaven—even the power of godliness—which can and will thwart the forces of evil if we will be worthy of those sacred blessings. [Our] community will be protected, our families will be protected, our children will be safeguarded as we live the gospel, visit the temple, and live close to the Lord. … God bless us as Saints to live worthy of the covenants and ordinances made in this sacred place.

Yet who can "live worthy"? Since we are unable to comply with all of God's standards (Rom. 3:23; Gen. 8:21; Ps 51:5, 58:3; Eccles. 9:3; Jer. 17:9), all people deserve death because all good works by themselves are like "filthy rags" in the sight of God (Rom. 6:23; Isa. 64:6). But God Himself has provided the way through faith to allow believers to experience the fellowship of God and become righteous in His sight. As Christian theologian B. B. Warfield once said, "The works of a sinful man will, of course, be as sinful as he is, and nothing but condemnation can be built on them" (*Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield* 1:283)

One of the toughest concepts for anyone, especially Mormons, to understand is that faith, not works, justifies a person before God. A good example of justification by faith is the story of the Philippian jailer in Acts 16. Paul and Silas were incarcerated in Philippi when a miraculous earthquake opened their jail cell door. When the jailer saw that all of the prison cells were open as well, he prepared to commit suicide only to be stopped by Paul, who told him not to fear because no one had escaped.

Seeing this to be true, the frightened jailer asked Paul, "What must I do to be saved?" (v. 30). If Paul had been a good Mormon living in modern times, his response might have been, "Believe that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God and that the Book of Mormon is the Word of God. Join the true church, don't drink coffee or tea, pay a full tithe, receive the Melchizedek priesthood, be baptized for your dead relatives, perform your endowments, and make sure you are married for time and eternity. Do these, along with following the whole law, and thou shalt be saved."

Instead, Paul and Silas merely answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house" (v. 31). It is important to note that Paul made no reference to following any set of rules or rigid standards. Rather, his message was simply, "Believe . . . and thou shalt be saved." As a result of their saving faith, the new believers were immediately baptized.

The New Testament contains many examples of how belief alone, not one's works, justifies a person before God. For instance, Jesus said in John 5:24, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life." He also said in John 6:47, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life."

Paul clearly communicated this truth in Ephesians 2:8–9 when he said faith, not works, justifies a person before God. He also declared in Titus 3:5–6 that Christians are saved, "not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior."

Christian theologian F. F. Bruce expounded on the idea that faith, not one's personal works, brings redemption:

> If there is to be any salvation for either Jews or Gentiles, then, it must be based not on ethical achievement but on the grace of God. What Jews and Gentiles need alike, in fact, is to have their records blotted out by an act of divine amnesty and to have the assurance of acceptance by God for no merit of their own but by his spontaneous mercy. For this need God has made provision in Christ. Thanks to his redemptive work, men may find themselves "in the clear" before God. . . . The benefits of the atonement thus procured may be appropriated by faith—and only by faith. (*Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, p. 328.

John 6:28-29 reports: "Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." Belief is a provision of God and is not something we are able to provide for ourselves through our own efforts. Mormons who attend the temple make promises they can never keep and yet never know the benefits of having a personal relationship with Jesus. Until it is

understood that this is possible and a person acts to give his/her life over to Christ, the Mormon—no matter how good he or she is—will never be set free.

The temple ceremony was given by a wise Heavenly Father to help us become more Christlike.

So, in other words, Mormonism says that God set up a system whereby people had to make promises that they would never be able to keep in order "to help us become more Christlike." But if becoming more "Christlike" is impossible because it's impossible to keep all the promises a person is supposed to make, then why even bother?

We will not be able to dwell in the company of celestial beings unless we are pure and holy. The laws and ordinances which cause men and women to come out of the world and become sanctified are administered only in these holy places. They were given by revelation and are comprehended by revelation. It is for this reason that one of the Brethren has referred to the temple as the "university of the Lord."

If you are a Latter-day Saint, would you consider yourself "pure and holy"? If not, Benson said you cannot dwell in the celestial kingdom.

No member of the Church can be perfected without the ordinances of the temple. We have a mission to assist those who do not have these blessings to receive them.

The most often practiced ordinance in the Mormon temple is vicarious baptism for the dead. Since Christianity was said to be dead in apostasy from the time after the apostles until the early nineteenth century, members as young as twelve "can visit the temple to be baptized for their ancestors who have died without being baptized" (Special Temple Issue of the *Ensign,* October 2010, p. 77). This doctrine of baptism for the dead teaches that a Mormon can "become a savior on Mount Zion."

Despite the emphasis on this doctrine, Christianity teaches that salvation is offered to the living. The Bible is very clear in Hebrews 9:27 that judgment follows this life. Further hope of attaining favor with God is lost at death. In fact, Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 6:2 that "now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation."

Although Mormons like to reference 1 Corinthians 15:29 to support baptism for the dead, there is no evidence that Christians actually participated in a rite that is similar to that practiced by Mormons. While biblical scholars have noted that heretical groups such as the Cerinthians and Marcionites practiced a form of baptism for the dead, Paul separated himself from such as these when he said, "Else what shall *they* do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are *they* then baptized for the dead?" If baptism for the dead was, as D&C 128:17 puts it, the "most glorious of all subjects belonging to the everlasting gospel,"it seems odd that Paul

would not include himself as a participant; Paul neither condones nor condemns the practice, referring to it as nothing more than an illustration to support his point of resurrection of the body.

Another interesting point comes from D. A. Carson, a research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. He wrote:

> When something is mentioned only once, it cannot be given the same weight of importance as the central themes of Scripture. . . . When something is mentioned only once, there is more likelihood of misinterpreting it, whereas matters repeatedly discussed are clarified by their repetition in various contexts. ("Did Paul Baptize for the Dead?" *Christianity Today*, August 10, 1998, p. 63).

A powerful and often-quoted Book of Mormon passage that seems to deny vicarious work after death is Alma 34:32-35. It reads:

> For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors.

And now, as I said unto you before, as ye have had so many witnesses, therefore, I beseech of you that ye do not procrastinate the day of your repentance until the end; for after this day of life, which is given us to prepare for eternity, behold, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed.

Ye cannot say, when ye are brought to that awful crisis, that I will repent, that I will return to my God. Nay, ye cannot say this; for that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, that same spirit will have power to possess your body in that eternal world.

For behold, if ye have procrastinated the day of your repentance even until death, behold, ye have become subjected to the spirit of the devil, and he doth seal you his; therefore, the Spirit of the Lord hath withdrawn from you, and hath no place in you, and the devil hath all power over you; and this is the final state of the wicked.

Notice how the Book of Mormon states that this is the "final state of the wicked." As BYU professor Charles R. Harrell points out:

> There is no indication in the Book of Mormon that Christ introduced the doctrine of salvation for the dead during his visit to the Nephites—even though, according to LDS doctrine, he had just visited the spirits in prison and opened the door for their salvation. On the contrary, the Book of Mormon people were taught not to worry about those who die without having heard the gospel in this life since they are redeemed automatically through the Atonement. The whole notion of vicarious work for the dead seems incongruous with Book of Mormon theology *("This is My Doctrine,"* p. 361).

We have the privilege of opening the doors of salvation to our ancestors.

Temples are built and dedicated so that, through the priesthood, parents can be sealed to their children and children can be sealed to their parents. These sealing ordinances apply to both the living and the dead. If we fail to be sealed to our progenitors and our posterity, the purpose of this earth, man's exaltation, will be utterly wasted so far as we are concerned.

Where is the biblical evidence to support the case that "sealings" ever took place in the temple?

It is not sufficient for a husband and wife to be sealed in the temple to guarantee their exaltation—if they are faithful—they must also be eternally linked with their progenitors and see that the work is done for those ancestors. "They without us," said the Apostle Paul, "cannot be made perfect—neither can we without our dead be made perfect" (D&C 128:15). Our members must therefore understand that they have an individual responsibility to see that they are linked to their progenitors—or, as sacred scripture designates, our "fathers." This is the meaning of section 2, verse 2, in the Doctrine and Covenants when Moroni declared that Elijah "shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers."

Notice how Paul is supposedly quoted from the Doctrine and Covenants, not the New Testament. If this concept is true, certainly it would have been so noted in the Bible. It is necessary to trust Joseph Smith for anything found in the Doctrine and Covenants.

When I think of genealogy, I see people—people I love who are waiting for our family, their posterity, to help them gain exaltation in the celestial kingdom.

How is it possible for families to be together forever?

Ours is the privilege of opening the doors of salvation to those souls who may be imprisoned in darkness in the world of spirits, that they may receive the light of the gospel and be judged the same as we. Yes, "the works that I do"—proffering the saving ordinances of the gospel to others—"shall ye do also" [see John 14:12]. How many thousands of our kindred yet await these sealing ordinances?

John 14:12 has nothing to do with saving our ancestors who have already died.

It is well to ask, "Have I done all I can as an individual on this side of the veil? Will I be a savior to them—my own progenitors?"

Nobody can be a "savior"–for himself or anyone else–except Jesus Himself.

Without them, we cannot be made perfect! Exaltation is a family affair.

Exaltation is an “impossible” affair.

The veil is very thin. We are living in eternity. All is as with one day with God. I imagine that to the Lord there is no veil. It is all one great program. I am sure there is rejoicing in heaven as we meet [in the temple]. Our progenitors are rejoicing, and my hope and prayer is that we will take advantage of the opportunities now afforded us to come regularly to the temple.

Those of you who have worked at your genealogies, who realize the importance of the work and have felt the excitement that comes from tying families together and learning of your noble heritage, need to share that excitement with others. Help them to see the joy and fulfillment you see in the work. We need to proselyte more of our members into this work. There is much to be done, as you all know, and there are many, many members who could do the work and who would enjoy doing the work if some of us—all of you—would just ignite that spark in them through your enthusiasm, example, and devotion.

Genealogy is one of the ways the Mormon Church gets its membership so busy that they have time for nothing else.

Increased temple attendance leads to increased personal revelation.

I promise you that, with increased attendance in the temples of our God, you shall receive increased personal revelation to bless your life as you bless those who have died.

If that “personal revelation” continues to be contrary to the Word of God (the Bible), then it does nobody any good.

Chapter 14: Marriage and Family: Ordained of God

"The family is one of God's greatest fortresses against the evils of our day. Help keep your family strong and close and worthy of our Father in Heaven's blessings."

From the Life of Ezra Taft Benson

From the beginning of their marriage, Ezra and Flora Benson made their home and family their top priority. When their children were young, they began emphasizing that they wanted their family to have no "empty chairs" in the eternities. President Benson emphasized this same message during his service as a Church leader. He said:

"God intended the family to be eternal. With all my soul, I testify to the truth of that declaration. May He bless us to strengthen our homes and the lives of each family member so that in due time we can report to our Heavenly Father in His celestial home that we are all there—father, mother, sister, brother, all who hold each other dear. Each chair is filled. We are all back home."

God has a place for believers—the true "family of God—"in the eternities." However, the family relationships we have upon this earth will not be the same as what will be found in heaven. Jesus said in Mark 12:25, "For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven." In Mormonism, the family unit is central. Many Latter-day Saints don't stress existence with Jesus but rather with their family. This is in spite of Mormon 7:7, a verse many Latter-day Saints find impossible to understand. It says,

And he hath brought to pass the redemption of the world, whereby he that is found guiltless before him at the judgment day hath it given unto him to dwell in the presence of God in his kingdom, to sing ceaseless praises with the choirs above, unto the Father, and unto the Son, and unto the Holy Ghost, which are one God, in a state of happiness which hath no end.

As much as I love my wife, children, parents, and other familial relatives, they could never replace what Jesus Christ means in my life. Although I don't believe in the Book of Mormon, I accept and celebrate Mormon 7:7, a reference that "gets it" more than later LDS scripture composed by Joseph Smith. (To clarify, I don't think Christians will spend the majority of their time singing, but I look forward to that part because I think my voice will greatly improve!) Taking the "family" and moving it into an idolatrous situation (as if this is supposed to supersede our commitment to God) is not what God intended.

Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson

The family is the most important organization in time and in eternity.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints views the family as the most important organization in time and all eternity. The Church teaches that everything should center in and around the family. It stresses that the preservation of family life in time and eternity takes precedence above all other interests.

Marriage and family life are ordained of God. In an eternal sense, salvation is a family affair. God holds parents responsible for their stewardship in rearing their family. It is a most sacred responsibility.

I want to make sure I communicate correctly. I too value family. The priority of family should be second only to our commitment to God. But to say "that everything should center in and around the family"—while sounding somehow true—is not a biblical teaching. Otherwise how could Jesus have told the great crowds in Luke 14:26-27,

> If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

Someone might claim that "Jesus wasn't being literal here." I would agree. But at the same time, He was saying that a person who doesn't have Jesus as the main priority cannot be a "disciple." Think about it for a moment. When Jesus is the top priority in any person's life, the human becomes a better husband and father while she becomes a superior wife and mother. Jesus said in Matthew 6:33, "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." If a person turns "family"—as important as this is—into the number-one priority, everything goes out of kilter. Such a teaching was never proclaimed in the Bible.

In an account given in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus was approached by members of the Sadducees, the Jewish religious party that did not believe in a bodily resurrection from the dead (Matt. 22:23–33; Mark 12:18–27; Luke 20:27–38). Trying to trick Him, these leaders presented what appears to be a hypothetical situation involving seven brothers. When the oldest brother died, he left a wife and no children. According to the Mosaic law, the next oldest unmarried brother took the woman for his wife. However, the second brother died, as did the third through seventh brothers. Before they died, each of them had married the oldest brother's wife, making her a widow seven times over.

In Mark 12:23 they asked, "In the resurrection, when they rise again, whose wife will she be? For the seven had her as wife." Jesus chastised His inquisitors in verse 24, saying they did not know the Scriptures. Verse 25 reads, "For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (ESV).

At face value and as it has been historically interpreted, Jesus appears to be saying that heaven will be much different from life as it is known on earth. While the gifts of sex and procreation are important parts of the earthly life, these will not be a part of the afterlife. The joys in store for the believer are incredibly more magnificent than the temporary pleasure of sexual or familial fulfillment.

In addition, there will be no need to procreate in heaven. Thus, while it appears we will be able to recognize fellow believers in heaven, there is no indication from the Bible that we will be eternally paired with a particular mate. Historically, Christians view all believers as part of God's great family rather than millions of smaller groups

Some Mormon leaders have read their own interpretations into this passage, explaining that the fictional wife in the parable had been eternally sealed to the first husband. While these explanations may sound good to a Mormon audience that cherishes the institution of marriage, the ability to read between the lines of Jesus's teaching does not make a doctrine true. How many people would, on reading this Synoptic Gospel account alone in conjunction with the teachings of the Bible, exclaim, "Here's evidence for the biblical principle of eternal marriage!"? Rather than supporting the view of eternal marriage, Jesus explained that the institution of marriage was for this life only and not the life to come. To assume anything more is biblically and exegetically unsound.

In addition, consider Matthew 12:46-50, which says,

> 46 While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. 48 But he replied to the man who told him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" 49 And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! 50 For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Christians believe they will spend eternity with a new family, the family of God. Will this include mothers, brothers, and sisters? Of course, for all who are true believers (i.e. receiving Jesus by grace through faith) will reside in heaven. The family unit we know on earth was never meant to be a substitute for God's family in heaven. Mormons who think hard about this doctrine will realize how impossible the LDS doctrine really is.

After all, every LDS family has "black sheep," or those who didn't do everything necessary to attain exaltation. (Some leaders have said there will be many calling themselves Latter-day Saints who will end up falling short at the end.) How could such a family be considered complete if some in their family don't qualify for the celestial kingdom?

In happy marriages, husbands and wives love and serve God and each other.

Marriage, the home, and family are more than mere social institutions. They are divine, not man-made. God ordained marriage from the very beginning. In the record of that first marriage recorded in Genesis, the Lord makes four significant pronouncements: first, that it is not good for man to be alone; second, that woman was created to be a helpmeet for man; third, that they twain should be one flesh; and fourth, that man should leave father and mother and cleave unto his wife. (See Genesis 2:18, 24.)

Later, as though to reinforce the earlier statement, the Lord said: "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Matthew 19:6). He also said, "Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart, and shalt cleave unto her and none else" (D&C 42:22).

What Benson fails to mention is that Mormonism hasn't always thought this way. For many years, Mormonism practiced polygamy, abolished only because of the political pressure applied by the U.S. government. Joseph Smith had at least 34 wives, perhaps more according to the LDS Church itself (see footnote 24 in this LDS Gospel Topics essay. For MRM's response to this essay, go here.).

A third of Smith's wives were married to living husbands; another third were teenagers as young as 14 (admitted by the LDS Church in the essay). Smith—along with a number of other LDS leaders—certainly didn't practice the "one flesh" concept practiced by a man and a woman. For more information, go here.

Marriage itself must be regarded as a sacred covenant before God. A married couple have an obligation not only to each other, but to God. He has promised blessings to those who honor that covenant.

Fidelity to one's marriage vows is absolutely essential for love, trust, and peace. Adultery is unequivocally condemned by the Lord. …

Restraint and self-control must be ruling principles in the marriage relationship. Couples must learn to bridle their tongues as well as their passions.

Prayer in the home and prayer with each other will strengthen [a couple's] union. Gradually thoughts, aspirations, and ideas will merge into a oneness until you are seeking the same purposes and goals.

Rely on the Lord, the teachings of the prophets, and the scriptures for guidance and help, particularly when there may be disagreements and problems.

Spiritual growth comes by solving problems together—not by running from them. Today's inordinate emphasis on individualism brings egotism and separation. Two individuals becoming "one flesh" is still the Lord's standard. (See Gen. 2:24.)

The secret of a happy marriage is to serve God and each other. The goal of marriage is unity and oneness, as well as self-development. Paradoxically, the more we serve one another, the greater is our spiritual and emotional growth.

"The secret of a happy marriage is to serve God and each other."

The counsel from the Apostle Paul is most beautiful and to the point. He said simply, "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church" (Ephesians 5:25).

I am in agreement with the paragraph above. Of course, God wants the family structure to be sound. There are proper roles of husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, and children. God intends the family structure to exist the way he intended.

In latter-day revelation the Lord speaks again of this obligation. He said, "Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart, and shalt cleave unto her and none else" (D&C 42:22). To my knowledge there is only one other thing in all scripture that we are commanded to love with all our hearts, and that is God Himself. Think what that means!

Joseph Smith received this "revelation," supposedly from God. Notice how he was told to love "thy wife," not "wives," and "cleave unto her and none else." Yet in the next decade and a half after composing this section, Smith took on some thirty-plus additional wives, unbeknownst to Emma. The Gospel Topics essay said she knew about four of his wives and may have known of some others. "But Emma likely did not know about all of Joseph's sealings," the essay reports. In *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith*, the two LDS authors provide plenty of information to show how Joseph lied a number of times to his wife about his affairs.

This kind of love can be shown for your wives in so many ways. First and foremost, nothing except God Himself takes priority over your wife in your life—not work, not recreation, not hobbies. Your wife is your precious, eternal helpmate—your companion.

But wait a minute, this statement contradicts an earlier statement that the family ought to be central in a person's life! What ought to be the top priority: God? Or the family? (Placing anything, even something as good as family, before our commitment to God is breaking the First Commandment and ought to be considered idolatry.) A person cannot have two masters, Jesus said. And if Jesus never taught that the family ought to be the centerpiece, then what right does the LDS Church have to turn the human family into an entity that contains eternal connections?

Strong families cultivate love, respect, and support for each family member.

Let us strengthen the family. Family and individual prayers morning and evening can invite the blessings of the Lord on our households. Mealtime provides a wonderful time to review the activities of the day and to not only feed the body but to feed the spirit as well, with members of

the family taking turns reading the scriptures, particularly the Book of Mormon. Nighttime is a great time for the busy father to go to the bedside of each of his children, to talk with them, answer their questions, and tell them how much they are loved.

I think family devotions are great, but I say leave the Book of Mormon on the shelf. Read from the Bible instead. The Book of Mormon is not scripture for Christians all over the world.

God has revealed that the family may endure beyond the grave.

The love we know here is not a fleeting shadow, but the very substance that binds families together for time and eternity.

It was through Joseph Smith that the God of Heaven revealed the truth that the family may endure beyond the grave—that our sympathies, affections, and love for each other may exist forever.

No sacrifice is too great to have the blessings of an eternal marriage. To most of us, a temple is easily accessible, perhaps so conveniently that the blessing is taken too casually. As with other matters of faithfulness in gospel living, being married the Lord's way takes a willingness to deny yourself ungodliness—worldliness—and a determination to do our Father's will. By this act of faith, we show our love to God and our regard for a posterity yet unborn. As our family is our greatest source of joy in this life, so it may well be in the eternity.

Should the family be the "greatest source of joy in this life"? I would say no. Again, while very important, our main source of happiness and fulfillment should not be wrapped up in our families, which can lead to disappointment. Rather, it should be fully invested with God. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, it is vital to seek after God "first," and "then" all these things (including family) shall be added.

Home and family. What sweet memories surge up in our breasts at the mere mention of these cherished words! May I wish for you prayerfully, and with all the fervor of my soul, that you may know the unspeakable joy and satisfaction of honorable parenthood. You will miss one of the deepest joys of this life and eternity if you wilfully avoid the responsibilities of parenthood and home-building. As revealed through the Prophet Joseph Smith, the glorious concept of home and the enduring family relationship lies at the very basis of our happiness here and hereafter.

I would much rather trust Jesus than Joseph Smith or Ezra Taft Benson. The family should never be considered "the very basis of our happiness here and hereafter." Instead, follow God and His ways. Only then can satisfaction be found.

Check out these other articles:

- Is it possible for Families to be Together Forever?
- The Family and Being Together Forever
- Did Jesus Believe Families are Forever?

Chapter 15: The Sacred Callings of Fathers and Mothers

A father's calling is eternal.

Fathers, yours is an eternal calling from which you are never released. Callings in the Church, as important as they are, by their very nature are only for a period of time, and then an appropriate release takes place. But a father's calling is eternal, and its importance transcends time. It is a calling for both time and eternity.

Unless the reader understands what is meant by "eternal calling," important nuances may be missed. According to Mormonism, there is a state before this life (or mortal probation), officially called preexistence, or premortality. According to this unique doctrine, every person prior to the mortal probation existed as a spirt being and had at least some level of obedience (i.e. the choosing of Jesus over Lucifer when the Savior of the world was determined) to eventually receive a human body. Hence, all people—good, bad, or whatever—were part of a human family in this previous state.

During this lifetime, Mormon couples are instructed to get "sealed" in the temple. It is believed that their ties to each other don't end in this life but continue to the next. Any children born to such a couple are considered "Born in the Covenant," linking them forever to that nuclear family. If the mother and father become Latter-day Saints after having children, they can go to the temple as a family and get sealed together.

The responsibility, then, is for each family member to "choose the right" and live an obedient life. For a person to attain the highest level of heaven (celestial kingdom), obedience is required. Then, in the heavenlies, a faithful Mormon father and mother hope to have their children together for eternity. This is what Benson meant when he used the term "eternal calling."

Our pattern, or model, for fatherhood is our Heavenly Father. How does He work with His children? Well, in order to know that, of course, [fathers] will need to know something about the gospel, the great plan of the Lord.

For a family to be together, the father is responsible to guide the family in the right way. This is the crux of this particular chapter.

For a man, there is no calling as high as that of a righteous patriarch, married in the house of the Lord, presiding over His children. Even the very Elohim has us address Him as "our Father who art in heaven" (Matthew 6:9; 3 Nephi 13:9).

In Mormonism, fifth President Lorenzo Snow's famous couplet rings true:

As man is, God once was.

As God is, man may become.

Just as LDS leaders have taught how God once was like all humans in a previous world, qualifying for advancement through his good works, so too all Latter-day Saint males are told they have the opportunity to someday rule in a future world, with the ability to bring their wives and children with them.

Fathers are to provide spiritual leadership in their families.

The father must hunger and thirst and yearn to bless his family, go to the Lord, ponder the words of the Lord, and live by the Spirit to know the mind and will of the Lord and what he must do to lead his family.

[Fathers,] you have a sacred responsibility to provide spiritual leadership in your family.

In a pamphlet published some years ago by the Council of the Twelve, we said the following: "Fatherhood is leadership, the most important kind of leadership. It has always been so; it always will be so. Father, with the assistance and counsel and encouragement of your eternal companion, you preside in the home" (Father, Consider Your Ways [pamphlet, 1973], 4–5). …

With love in my heart for the fathers in Israel, may I suggest 10 specific ways that fathers can give spiritual leadership to their children:

1. Give father's blessings to your children. Baptize and confirm your children. Ordain your sons to the priesthood. These will become spiritual highlights in the lives of your children.

2. Personally direct family prayers, daily scripture reading, and weekly family home evenings. Your personal involvement will show your children how important these activities really are.

3. Whenever possible, attend Church meetings together as a family. Family worship under your leadership is vital to your children's spiritual welfare.

4. Go on daddy-daughter dates and father-and-sons' outings with your children. …

5. Build traditions of family vacations and trips and outings. These memories will never be forgotten by your children.

6. Have regular one-on-one visits with your children. Let them talk about what they would like to. Teach them gospel principles. Teach them true values. Tell them you love them. Personal time with your children tells them where Dad puts his priorities.

7. Teach your children to work, and show them the value of working toward a worthy goal. …

8. Encourage good music and art and literature in your homes. Homes that have a spirit of refinement and beauty will bless the lives of your children forever.

9. As distances allow, regularly attend the temple with your wife. Your children will then better understand the importance of temple marriage and temple vows and the eternal family unit.

10. Have your children see your joy and satisfaction in service to the Church. This can become contagious to them, so they, too, will want to serve in the Church and will love the kingdom.

Oh, husbands and fathers in Israel, you can do so much for the salvation and exaltation of your families! Your responsibilities are so important.

In this list, Benson instructs fathers to take their roles seriously so they might be able to train up their children in the way they should go. I must say, Latter-day Saint children are generally very well taught. They learn in their homes and in church-sponsored classes, from "primary" to "seminary" classes for high school students and "institute of religion" classes for those in college. I have talked to thousands of Latter-day Saints over the years, and I have met many young people who can articulate the beliefs of their faith in an understandable way. This reflects good training.

I must say that I have no problem with parents training up one's children in the faith of the family. This is important in my family as well. I do not quibble with the ten points he lists. Christian fathers should also take such interest in their children and make sure their kids get the parental attention they need.

"Have regular one-on-one visits with your children."

We sometimes hear accounts of men, even in the Church, who think that being head of the home somehow puts them in a superior role and allows them to dictate and make demands upon their family.

The Apostle Paul points out that "the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church" (Ephesians 5:23; italics added). That is the model we are to follow in our role of presiding in the home. We do not find the Savior leading the Church with a harsh or unkind hand. We do not find the Savior treating His Church with disrespect or neglect. We do not find the Savior using force or coercion to accomplish His purposes. Nowhere do we find the Savior doing anything but that which edifies, uplifts, comforts, and exalts the Church. Brethren, I say to you with all soberness, He is the model we must follow as we take the spiritual lead in our families.

As the patriarch in your home, you have a serious responsibility to assume leadership in working with your children. You must help create a home where the Spirit of the Lord can abide. …

Your homes should be havens of peace and joy for your family. Surely no child should fear his own father—especially a priesthood father. A father's duty is to make his home a place of happiness and joy. … The powerful effect of righteous fathers in setting an example, disciplining and training, nurturing and loving is vital to the spiritual welfare of [their] children.

Dads are told not to exasperate their children. They should lead by example. With only 18 or so years we get with each child, every opportunity should be taken to instill righteous ways in the children.

A mother's role is ordained by God.

[Mothers] are, or should be, the very heart and soul of the family. No more sacred word exists in secular or holy writ than that of mother. There is no more noble work than that of a good and God-fearing mother.

In the eternal family, God established that fathers are to preside in the home. Fathers are to provide, to love, to teach, and to direct. A mother's role is also God-ordained. Mothers are to conceive, to bear, to nourish, to love, and to train. So declare the revelations.

In recent years, some LDS feminists have fought against this stereotype as presented here. One such group is Ordain Women, whose founder was excommunicated in 2014. By including this information in the manual, it doesn't appear the church is ready anytime soon to bestow priesthood responsibility upon the female membership. While I'm sure there will be independent voices making noise within the church, it appears its crackdown has squashed the mini-rebellion. Church leaders still rule with an iron fist.

We realize that some women, through no fault of their own, are not able to bear children. To these lovely sisters, every prophet of God has promised that they will be blessed with children in the eternities and that posterity will not be denied them.

In Mormonism, women are not done conceiving in this lifetime, as there will be propagation of spirit beings in the next life. Of course, a woman will not be responsible to populate her husband's world all by herself. This is why LDS leaders have insisted that polygamy will take place in the next life as well. Apostle Bruce R. McConkie wrote on page 578 of *Mormon Doctrine*:

> Obviously the holy practice will commence again after the Second Coming of the Son of Man and the ushering in of the millennium.

In fact, while Mormon men don't believe in getting married to multiple women in this life, they certainly have the ability to be sealed to more than one woman for all eternity. How does this work? If a man's wife dies (assuming they were married for both time and eternity) and he marries another woman, she too can be sealed to him if:

- She has been single her entire life
- She had been married for eternity but received a temple divorce
- She had been married for this life to another man but not for eternity.

A woman who has been married to a man for "eternity" cannot do this again. But having one man married eternally to two (or more) women is not unheard of. In fact, two LDS apostles are married in this way, as they have two women with whom they have been sealed for eternity.

For more information on this topic, click here.

Through pure faith, pleading prayers, fasting, and special blessings, many of these same lovely sisters, with their noble companions at their sides, have had miracles take place in their lives and have been blessed with children. Others have prayerfully chosen to adopt children. We salute these wonderful couples for the sacrifices and love you have given to those children you have chosen to call your own.

God bless our wonderful mothers. We pray for you. We sustain you. We honor you as you bear, nourish, train, teach, and love for eternity. I promise you the blessings of heaven and "all that [the] Father hath" (see D&C 84:38) as you magnify the noblest calling of all—a mother in Zion.

Mothers should love, teach, and spend effective time with their children.

Mothers in Zion, your God-given roles are so vital to your own exaltation and to the salvation and exaltation of your family. A child needs a mother more than all the things money can buy. Spending time with your children is the greatest gift of all.

With love in my heart for the mothers in Zion, I would now like to suggest 10 specific ways our mothers may spend effective time with their children.

[First,] whenever possible, be at the crossroads when your children are either coming or going—when they leave and return from school, when they leave or return from dates, when they bring friends home. Be there at the crossroads whether your children are 6 or 16. …

Second, mothers, take time to be a real friend to your children. Listen to your children, really listen. Talk with them, laugh and joke with them, sing with them, play with them, cry with them, hug them, honestly praise them. Yes, regularly spend one-on-one time with each child. Be a real friend to your children.

Third, take time to read to your children. Starting from the cradle, read to your sons and daughters. … You will plant a love for good literature and a real love for the scriptures if you will read to your children regularly.

Fourth, take time to pray with your children. Family prayers, under the direction of the father, should be held morning and night. Have your children feel of your faith as you call down the blessings of heaven upon them. … Have your children participate in family and personal prayers, and rejoice in their sweet utterances to their Father in Heaven.

Fifth, take time to have a meaningful weekly home evening. Have your children actively involved. Teach them correct principles. Make this one of your family traditions. …

Sixth, take time to be together at mealtimes as often as possible. This is a challenge as the children get older and lives get busier. But happy conversation, sharing of the day's plans and activities, and special teaching moments occur at mealtime because parents and children work at it.

Seventh, take time daily to read the scriptures together as a family. … Reading the Book of Mormon together as a family will especially bring increased spirituality into your home and will give both parents and children the power to resist temptation and to have the Holy Ghost as their constant companion. I promise you that the Book of Mormon will change the lives of your family.

Eighth, take time to do things as a family. Make family outings and picnics and birthday celebrations and trips special times and memory builders. Whenever possible, attend, as a family, events where one of the family members is involved, such as a school play, a ball game, a talk, a recital. Attend Church meetings together, and sit together as a family when you can. Mothers who help families pray and play together will [help them] stay together and will bless children's lives forever.

Ninth, mothers, take time to teach your children. Catch the teaching moments at mealtime, in casual settings, or at special sit-down times together, at the foot of the bed at the end of the day, or during an early-morning walk together. …

A mother's love and prayerful concern for her children are the most important ingredients in teaching her own. Teach children gospel principles. Teach them it pays to be good. Teach them there is no safety in sin. Teach them a love for the gospel of Jesus Christ and a testimony of its divinity.

Teach your sons and daughters modesty, and teach them to respect manhood and womanhood. Teach your children sexual purity, proper dating standards, temple marriage, missionary service, and the importance of accepting and magnifying Church callings.

Teach them a love for work and the value of a good education.

Teach them the importance of the right kind of entertainment, including appropriate movies, videos, music, books, and magazines. Discuss the evils of pornography and drugs, and teach them the value of living the clean life.

Yes, mothers, teach your children the gospel in your own home, at your own fireside. This is the most effective teaching that your children will ever receive. …

Tenth and finally, mothers, take the time to truly love your little children. A mother's unqualified love approaches Christlike love.

Your teenage children also need that same kind of love and attention. It seems easier for many mothers and fathers to express their love to their children when they are young, but more difficult when they are older. Work at this prayerfully. There need be no generation gap. And the key is love. Our young people need love and attention, not indulgence. They need empathy and understanding, not indifference from mothers and fathers. They need the parents' time. A mother's kindly teachings and her love for and confidence in a teenage son or daughter can literally save them from a wicked world.

Honestly, this is good advice for all mothers.

"Take time to read to your children."

Do you know one reason why righteous mothers love their children so much? Because they sacrifice so much for them. We love what we sacrifice for and we sacrifice for what we love.

Parents should work together in unity and love in raising their children.

Husbands and wives, as co-creators, should eagerly and prayerfully invite children into their homes. … Blessed is the husband and wife who have a family of children. The deepest joys and blessings in life are associated with family, parenthood, and sacrifice. To have those sweet spirits come into the home is worth practically any sacrifice.

When parents, in companionship, love, and unity, fulfill their heaven-imposed responsibility and children respond with love and obedience, great joy is the result.

God help us to support one another. May it start in the home as we support our families. May there be a spirit of loyalty, unity, love, and mutual respect. May husbands be loyal to their wives, true to them, love them, strive to ease their burdens, and share the responsibility for the care, training, and the rearing of the children. May mothers and wives show a spirit of helpfulness to their husbands, uphold and sustain them in their priesthood duties, and be loyal and true to the calls that come to them from the priesthood of God.

May we be faithful to this great obligation of parenthood, this sacred obligation, that we may build our homes solidly upon eternal principles, that we may have no regrets. May we never be recreant [unfaithful] to the great trust which has been imposed in us. May we always keep in mind that these spirits that have entered our homes are choice spirits.

In conclusion, I would say that the advice given in this chapter is practical. My major disagreement is I don't believe family units are eternal. The Bible does not teach in a preexistence or postmortal family life and therefore these concepts are rejected by Christianity.

For more information on this topic, see the following Families Forever?

Chapter 16: The Elderly in the Church

"May these golden years be your very best years as you fully live and love and serve. And God bless those who minister to your needs—your family, your friends, and your fellow Church members and leaders."

Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson

We can make the most of our senior years.

May we suggest eight areas in which we can make the most of our senior years:

Work in the temple and attend often. We who are older should use our energies not only to bless our predecessors, but to ensure that, insofar as possible, all of our posterity might receive the ordinances of exaltation in the temple. Work with your families; counsel with and pray for those who may yet be unwilling to prepare themselves. We urge all who can to attend the temple frequently and accept calls to serve in the temple when health and strength and distance will permit. We rely on you to help in temple service. With the increasing number of temples, we need more of our members to prepare themselves for this sweet service. Sister Benson and I are grateful that almost every week we can attend the temple together. What a blessing this has been in our lives!

Benson's desire is that the older people in his church attempt to help others involved with temple work. Yet if temple work is not something ordained by God, should anyone get involved with the temple? It's a deep topic and we have discussed it before in these reviews. (For example, see here.) Biblically, this is *not* a wise way for older people to spend their golden years. Instead, I'd encourage folks to volunteer, do service projects, get involved in others' lives (who are still living today), and so much more. Doing work on behalf of dead people is, quite frankly, a waste of time. (I'm not trying to be rude but rather realistic.) For more information on the temple, check out many articles here.

2. Collect and write family histories. We call on you to pursue vigorously the gathering and writing of personal and family histories. In so many instances, you alone have within you the history, the memory of loved ones, the dates and events. In some situations you are the family history. In few ways will your heritage be better preserved than by your collecting and writing your histories.

At face value, I have nothing against doing genealogical work. However, for a Mormon, it's a part of saving ancestors by allowing them to receive the gospel, something never commanded in scripture. Even Alma 34:32ff in the Book of Mormon teaches that there are no second chances.

The rest of this chapter is advice given to the elderly and others on how to interact with them. Very little doctrine is discussed, so I will pretty much skip the rest of the chapter.

I leave my blessing upon you. The Savior lives. This is His church. The work is true, and in the words of our Lord and Savior, "Look unto me, and endure to the end, and ye shall live; for unto him that endureth to the end will I give eternal life" (3 Nephi 15:9).

The chapter closes with this. Is this "His church"? According to LDS leaders, the answer is absolutely yes. First Nephi 14:10 agrees, saying,

And he said unto me: Behold there are save two churches only; the one is the church of the Lamb of God, and the other is the church of the devil; wherefore, whoso belongeth not to the church of the Lamb of God belongeth to that great church, which is the mother of abominations; and she is the whore of all the earth.

Some Christians mistakenly believe Mormonism is another Christian denomination. Certainly this is not how the church leaders think. If this is "His church," then what about churches outside this religion? Read the teachings of the LDS leaders carefully and it can be easily seen that this church is the only one with authority. Heavy criticism is leveled at all other churches. To obtain "eternal life," according to 3 Nephi, a person must "endure to the end." As talked about in many other reviews, this works-oriented religion is all about obedience and doing everything necessary to obtain exaltation, a much different gospel than what is presented in the Bible and what is taught in Christianity.

Chapter 17: Keeping the Law of Chastity

God has established the standard of chastity for His children.

In this dispensation the Lord reiterated the commandment given at Sinai when He said, "Thou shalt not … commit adultery, … nor do anything like unto it" (D&C 59:6, emphasis added). From the beginning of time, the Lord has set a clear and unmistakable standard of sexual purity. It always has been, it is now, and it always will be the same. That standard is the law of chastity. It is the same for all—for men and women, for old and young, for rich and poor.

It's interesting how Benson had to use a passage from D&C to make his point when he had a number of places he could have utilized in the Bible. Committing adultery is against the 10 Commandments as well as a number of passages in the Bible; true Christians do believe that sex outside of marriage is sinful. Paul explains how "porneia," or sexual immorality, is a sin against one's own body. For example, I recommend 1 Corinthians 6 and 7 for more information on this topic.

The Church has no double standard of morality. The moral code of heaven for both men and women is complete chastity before marriage and full fidelity after marriage. In the Book of Mormon, the prophet Jacob tells us that the Lord delights in the chastity of His children (see Jacob 2:28). Do you hear that, my brothers and sisters? The Lord is not just pleased when we are chaste; He delights in chastity. Mormon taught the same thing to his son Moroni when he wrote that chastity and virtue are "most dear and precious above all things" (Moroni 9:9).

Again, with so many biblical passages he could use, Benson sticks with extrabiblical (though scripture for Mormons) sources. He cites Jacob 2:28. Now, mind you, I don't have a problem with the morals of this verse, which interestingly enough explains how the "Lord God delight(s)in the chastity of women" (with no mention made of men). In context, this verse is talking about polygamy, which is the only mention of this practice in the entire Book of Mormon. Verses 23-24 say,

> **23** But the word of God burdens me because of your grosser crimes. For behold, thus saith the Lord: This people begin to wax in iniquity; they understand not the scriptures, for they seek to excuse themselves in committing whoredoms, because of the things which were written concerning David, and Solomon his son. **24** Behold, David and Solomon truly had many wives and concubines, which thing was abominable before me, saith the Lord.

David and Solomon have often been cited for why polygamy was allowed in Mormonism (officially until 1890), yet here they are condemned for this practice. Then, verse 27 says,

> **27** Wherefore, my brethren, hear me, and hearken to the word of the Lord: For there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none.

Following verse 28, God explains how the people's land will be cursed if they are not obedient. If God intended polygamy to be a normal biblical practice, the only reason would be to "raise up seed unto me" according to verse 30. In context, polygamy is the centerpiece of this passage. For all the possible places Benson could have quoted, it is curious why he chose this verse. I also wonder why Joseph Smith didn't understand this idea as a third of his polygamous wives were married to living husbands.

As a side note, Doctrine and Covenants 132:37-39 says God gave many wives and concubines to David and Solomon, which was said to be counted for righteousness and for which they were not credited with sin. If these are both considered authoritative scriptures, why the discrepancy?

The plaguing sin of this generation is sexual immorality.

The plaguing sin of this generation is sexual immorality. This, the Prophet Joseph said, would be the source of more temptations, more buffetings, and more difficulties for the elders of Israel than any other.

Don't get me wrong. I too am against sexual immorality (Greek "proneia.") Yet I really do wish Joseph Smith would have listened to his own instruction. In addition to his first wife Emma, he took on 33 additional wives. A third of these wives were teenagers as young as 14 and another third were married to living husbands. (For more information, check out www.Josephswives.com).This is morally wrong, whether it was done by a "prophet of God" or, say, by a sexual predator. There is no doubt in my mind that Smith engaged in sexual immorality.

Sexual immorality is a viper that is striking not only in the world, but in the Church today. Not to admit it is to be dangerously complacent or is like putting one's head in the sand. In the category of crimes, only murder and denying the Holy Ghost come ahead of illicit sexual relations, which we call fornication when it involves an unmarried person, or the graver sin of adultery when it involves one who is married. I know the laws of the land do not consider unchastity as serious as God does, nor punish as severely as God does, but that does not change its abominableness. In the eyes of God there is but one moral standard for men and women. In the eyes of God chastity will never be out of date. …

While Smith demonizes the "sexually immoral," the Latter-day Saint ought to be very careful. How many Latter-day Saints will suggest that they are faithful and not "sexually immoral"? How many could even have pride realizing how clean they think they are? Though Benson later quotes this passage, his readers may very easily forget Jesus's words in Matthew 5:27-28:

> You have heard that it was said to those of old, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

In other words, lust *is* "adultery." Someone might say it's not as serious as going all the way with another man's wife. I suppose it could be argued that kissing another man's wife is not as serious as petting or, God forbid, sexual intercourse. But aren't all of these things wrong? Yes, I agree that the consequences can be more severe the further a person takes it, but I think someone shouldn't put themselves on a pedestal for supposedly remaining "morally clean" when, at the heart, this is an issue everyone has dealt with and probably struggled with.

No sin is causing the loss of the Spirit of the Lord among our people more today than sexual promiscuity. It is causing our people to stumble, damning their growth, darkening their spiritual powers, and making them subject to other sins.

The very idea that a born-again believer could lose the Holy Spirit is not a biblical concept. Yes, sexual sin is serious, but to suggest that a person loses salvation over this sin…well, again, how should we judge the person who lusts. Does God draw a line in the sand that, until it's crossed, you're OK, but once it's crossed, you're damned? If so, then the logical question to ask Mr. Benson is how far can a person go in their "unchastity" and still remain on the moral side of the line. And why just sexual sin? Breaking any command of God is worthy of the punishment of eternal death (Rom. 6:23).

Moral purity is an eternal principle. The Spirit of God "cannot dwell in an unclean tabernacle" [see Helaman 4:24]. Purity is life-giving; impurity is deadly. God's holy laws cannot be broken with impunity. Great nations have fallen when they became morally corrupt, because the sins of immorality left their people scarred and misshapen creatures who were unable to face the challenge of their times.

Suggesting that the Spirit of God "cannot dwell in an unclean tabernacle" means that God cannot forgive sin. For the Christian, such a thought is blasphemous. Otherwise there would be no reason to hold out any hope. To say salvation hinges on whether or not we are morally clean is to say nobody must have salvation. Did Ezra Taft Benson conquer his own sexuality along with any sinful struggles he might have had?

Unchastity is the most damning of all evils, while moral purity is one of the greatest bulwarks of successful homemaking. Happy and successful homes cannot be built on immorality.

Unbelief is the only thing that cannot be forgiven. John 12:48 says, "The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day." Meanwhile, John 3:18 adds, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever

does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

Some would justify their immorality with the argument that restrictions against it are merely religious rules, rules that are meaningless because in reality there is no God. This you will recognize is merely an untruthful rationalization designed to justify one's carnal appetite, lust, and passion. God's law is irrevocable. It applies to all, whether they believe in God or not. Everyone is subject to its penalties, no matter how one tries to rationalize or ignore them.

Immorality … always brings with it attendant remorse. A person cannot indulge in promiscuous relations without suffering ill effects from it. He cannot do wrong and feel right—it is impossible. Anytime one breaks a law of God, he pays a penalty in heartache, in sadness, in remorse, in lack of self-respect, and he removes himself from contact with the Spirit of God.

I am trying to imagine how someone who struggles with sexual purity would read this chapter. Is Benson saying anything they haven't already heard? Probably not. If I were in this class at the local chapel on September 13, 2015 (the day it was scheduled across the world) and I heard people making it appear they are beyond immorality, as if they too have somehow arrived because how horrible such sin is, I would think my countenance would hit the floor. "Am I the only one who struggles?"

I can hear this person say to herself. "Will I be damned?" God offers hope and this is a true forgiveness of all sins. This forgiveness is not based on our personal morality or the ability to keep all the commandments…all the time, as Mormonism commands. Rather, it's acknowledging that I am a sinner and am in desperate need of God's grace.

I am reminded of Jesus's parable in Luke 18:9-14, the story of the publican and the Pharisee. It reads:

> 9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone
> else, Jesus told this parable: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee
> and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank
> you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax
> collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'
>
> 13 "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but
> beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'
>
> 14 "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all
> those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be
> exalted."

How many Mormons who read this lesson will act like the Pharisee rather than the penitent publican? Notice Jesus's words: only one man "went home justified before God." And it wasn't the Pharisee.

Benson is strong in his condemnation. He is short in his ability to describe a forgiving God, mainly because He did not know this type of God. While sexual immorality is wrong, it is not the scarlet lette, the one sin keeping us out of heaven. If you are a Latter-day Saint reading this, I hope you can see. For more on this, visit here.

Clean thoughts

Control your thoughts. No one steps into immorality in an instant. The first seeds of immorality are always sown in the mind. When we allow our thoughts to linger on lewd or immoral things, the first step on the road to immorality has been taken. I especially warn you against the evils of pornography. Again and again we hear from those caught in deep sin that often the first step on their road to transgression began with pornographic materials. The Savior taught that even when a man looks upon a woman to lust after her, or in other words, when he lets his thoughts begin to get out of control, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart (see Matt. 5:28; D&C 63:16).

I agree, sexual sin starts in the thought process. Pornography is also a scourge. So please don't think "going all the way" is the only way to be sexually immoral. Even lusting in one's heart is sin.

Those who think clean thoughts do not do dirty deeds. You are not only responsible before God for your acts but also for controlling your thoughts. So live that you would not blush with shame if your thoughts and acts could be flashed on a screen in your church. The old adage is still true that you sow thoughts and you reap acts, you sow acts and you reap habits, you sow habits and you reap a character, and your character determines your eternal destiny. "As a man thinketh, so is he." (See Prov. 23:7.)

To say "your character determines your eternal destiny"…well, then everyone is in trouble because we all struggle with sin. The propensity we have is to go down the pathway of sin rather than do right. Paul also struggled. Nobody put it better than Paul in Romans 7:

> 7 What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." 8 But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead. 9 Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. 10 I found that the very commandment

that was intended to bring life actually brought death. [11] For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. [12] So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

[13] Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! Nevertheless, in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it used what is good to bring about my death, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.

[14] We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.[15] I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. [16] And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good.[17] As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. [18] For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. [19] For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.[20] Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

[21] So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. [22] For in my inner being I delight in God's law; [23] but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. [24] What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? [25] Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.

Consider carefully the words of the prophet Alma to his errant son, Corianton, "Forsake your sins, and go no more after the lusts of your eyes." (Alma 39:9.)

"The lusts of your eyes." In our day, what does that expression mean?

Movies, television programs, and video recordings that are both suggestive and lewd.

Magazines and books that are obscene and pornographic.

We counsel you … not to pollute your minds with such degrading matter, for the mind through which this filth passes is never the same afterwards.

Be clean. Be virtuous in your thoughts and actions. Read good books. Never let your minds be subjected to pornography. … In the words of the Lord, "Let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God. The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion." (D&C 121:45–46.)

While I obviously disagree with Benson's conclusion that sexual sin can be the cause of a person losing his or her salvation, I concur that what we put into our minds has a powerful effect on who we are as people. With popular culture beckoning, we must understand that the old computer adage of GIGO ("Garbage In, Garbage Out") still rings true today.

Through proper repentance, those who are entangled in sexual sin can become clean again.

There may be some for whom the counsel to prepare and prevent is too late. You may already be deeply entangled in serious sin. If this is the case, there is no choice now but to repair your lives and repent of your sins. To you I would suggest five important things you can do to come back to a state of moral purity. Flee immediately from any situation you are in that is either causing you to sin or that may cause you to sin. Plead with the Lord for the power to overcome. Let your priesthood leaders help you resolve the transgression and come back into full fellowship with the Lord. Drink from the divine fountain and fill your lives with positive sources of power. Remember that through proper repentance, you can become clean again.

For those who pay the price required by true repentance, the promise is sure. You can be clean again. The despair can be lifted. The sweet peace of forgiveness will flow into your lives. In this dispensation the Lord spoke with clarity when he said, "Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more" (D&C 58:42).

Notice that Benson quotes D&C 58:42. I'm not sure why he didn't add verse 43, which says, "By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins—behold, he will confess them and forsake them." According to the Doctrine and Covenants, true repentance is forsaking sin. But what if that sin is lust? Then forsaking this sin is necessary as well.

The problem with a works-righteousness religious system like Mormonism is that nobody is capable of attaining perfection. If you revert to the sins of old, your repentance of your former sins apparently didn't stick and you must start all over again. Spencer Kimball likened this to sliding down a ladder and starting all over again. He wrote,

The transgressor must have reached a "point of no return," to sin wherein there is not merely a renunciation but also a deep abhorrence of the sin–where the sin becomes most distasteful to him and where the desire or urge to sin is cleared out of his life (*The Miracle of Forgiveness*, pg. 355).

Who is able to do this?

There is no lasting happiness in immorality. There is no joy to be found in breaking the law of chastity. Just the opposite is true. There may be momentary pleasure. For a time it may seem like everything is wonderful. But quickly the relationship will sour. Guilt and shame set in. We

become fearful that our sins will be discovered. We must sneak and hide, lie and cheat. Love begins to die. Bitterness, jealousy, anger, and even hate begin to grow. All of these are the natural results of sin and transgression.

On the other hand, when we obey the law of chastity and keep ourselves morally clean, we will experience the blessings of increased love and peace, greater trust and respect for our marital partners, deeper commitment to each other, and therefore a deep and significant sense of joy and happiness.

Sin certainly has a way to turn momentary pleasure into great despair. While I can agree with the standard of chastity before marriage and fidelity after, I think it was important for me in this chapter to explain how our salvation is not dependent on conquering sin once and for all.

While Christians are called to a sanctified life, we must understand that life is a struggle and perfection will not be attained—no matter how hard we try—until eternity. We can only rely on the forgiveness that God has made available to those who truly believe and can claim the promise in 1 John 5:13: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may *know* that you have eternal life."

I know I have eternal life based not on my personal righteousness or keeping all the commandments, but solely on my position in Christ based on faith. As Romans 5:8 puts it, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Without this, I can have no hope.

Chapter 18: Beware of Pride

I earnestly seek an interest in your faith and prayers as I strive to bring forth light on this Book of Mormon message—the sin of pride. This message has been weighing heavily on my soul for some time. I know the Lord wants this message delivered now.

In the premortal council, it was pride that felled Lucifer, "a son of the morning." (2 Ne. 24:12–15; see also D&C 76:25–27; Moses 4:3.) At the end of this world, when God cleanses the earth by fire, the proud will be burned as stubble and the meek shall inherit the earth. (See 3 Ne. 12:5; 25:1; D&C 29:9; JS—H 1:37; Mal. 4:1.)

Three times in the Doctrine and Covenants the Lord uses the phrase "beware of pride," including a warning to the second elder of the Church, Oliver Cowdery, and to Emma Smith, the wife of the Prophet. (D&C 23:1; see also 25:14; 38:39.)

Perhaps Joseph Smith ought to have been warned about this very same issue, as pride is something he certainly had even at the end of his life. Consider the following, as recorded in *History of the Church* 6:408-409:

> Come on! ye prosecutors! ye false swearers! All hell, boil over! Ye burning mountains, roll down your lava! for I will come out on the top at last. I have more to boast of than ever any man had. I am the only man that has ever been able to keep a whole church together since the days of Adam. A large majority of the whole have stood by me. Neither Paul, John, Peter, nor Jesus ever did it. I boast that no man ever did such a work as I. The followers of Jesus ran away from Him; but the Latter-day Saints never ran away from me yet. You know my daily walk and conversation. I am in the bosom of a virtuous and good people. How I do love to hear the wolves howl! When they can get rid of me, the devil will also go. For the last three years I have a record of all my acts and proceedings, for I have kept several good, faithful, and efficient clerks in constant employ: they have accompanied me everywhere, and carefully kept my history, and they have written down what I have done, where I have been, and what I have said; therefore my enemies cannot charge me with any day, time, or place, but what I have written testimony to prove my actions; and my enemies cannot prove anything against me.

Someone may ask, what is the context? I suggest you look this up for yourself here.This sermon was recorded in May 1844 as a "testimony against the dissenters at Nauvoo." Someone might suggest that Smith's attitude was no different than Paul, who "boasted" in 2 Corinthians 11:16ff regarding his status. The circumstances were much different. Paul never claimed he was able to do a work that John, Peter, nor Jesus ever did. Rather, in comparing himself with the "super-apostles," Paul was providing his credentials. (My Bible's subheading to this section

reads “Reluctant Boasting.”) And then, in chapter 12, Paul deals with the “thorn in the flesh.” Jesus told him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Paul concludes that section by stating the following in verses 9 and 10:

> Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

I also want to point out that, in that same talk, Smith told an outright lie recorded on page 411 when he said, “What a thing it is for a man to be accused of committing adultery, and having seven wives, when I can only find one.” The fact is, at the time he said this and just a month before he died, Smith didn’t have just seven wives. Instead, he had at least 33 wives! In fact, the Gospel Topics essay published on the LDS website in late 2014 says that Smith had between 30-40 wives! (For more information on that Gospel Topics essay, see here.) We encourage you to look through www.JosephsWives.com to see what a whopper Smith told!

The central feature of pride is enmity toward God and our fellowmen.

Pride is a very misunderstood sin, and many are sinning in ignorance. (See Mosiah 3:11; 3 Ne. 6:18.) In the scriptures there is no such thing as righteous pride—it is always considered a sin.

If this is the case and pride is “always considered a sin,” then what about Joseph Smith’s words as listed above? Do we have any indication that Smith repented of his sin?

The proud cannot accept the authority of God giving direction to their lives. (See Hel. 12:6.) They pit their perceptions of truth against God’s great knowledge, their abilities versus God’s priesthood power, their accomplishments against His mighty works.

Once more, I ask, what should we do about Joseph?

Pride is manifest in many ways.

Pride is a sin that can readily be seen in others but is rarely admitted in ourselves. Most of us consider pride to be a sin of those on the top, such as the rich and the learned, looking down at the rest of us. (See 2 Ne. 9:42.) There is, however, a far more common ailment among us—and that is pride from the bottom looking up. It is manifest in so many ways, such as faultfinding, gossiping, backbiting, murmuring, living beyond our means, envying, coveting, withholding gratitude and praise that might lift another, and being unforgiving and jealous.

Something that a Latter-day Saint ought to consider is the pride many Mormons have in going to the temple. To be able to attend a Mormon temple, a temple recommend is required. What does a person need to do to receive this special identification? First, he or she must be considered

worthy. He or she must be a tithe-payer; if not, restitution must be made. Also, no hot drinks are allowed to be imbibed, the person must be sexually pure, the Sabbath must be honored, and other requirements are also necessary. It's all based on merit and "personal worthiness."

I have never been a Latter-day Saint, nor have I attended the LDS temple, but I can only imagine the pride that must be inside a person who realizes he or she is considered by the "Church" as "worthy," a place where most other Mormons are unable to attend. The Church promotes a pride that is not easily overcome.

Pride results in secret combinations which are built up to get power, gain, and glory of the world. (See Hel. 7:5; Ether 8:9, 16, 22–23; Moses 5:31.) This fruit of the sin of pride, namely secret combinations, brought down both the Jaredite and the Nephite civilizations and has been and will yet be the cause of the fall of many nations. (See Ether 8:18–25.)

Temple Mormons learn "secret" handshakes and receive new names, which they're not allowed to divulge. What happens in the temple stays in the temple. Truly, this attitude fosters pride.

Another face of pride is contention. Arguments, fights, unrighteous dominion, generation gaps, divorces, spouse abuse, riots, and disturbances all fall into this category of pride.

Contention in our families drives the Spirit of the Lord away. It also drives many of our family members away. Contention ranges from a hostile spoken word to worldwide conflicts. The scriptures tell us that "only by pride cometh contention." (Prov. 13:10; see also Prov. 28:25.)

The scriptures testify that the proud are easily offended and hold grudges. (See 1 Ne. 16:1–3.) They withhold forgiveness to keep another in their debt and to justify their injured feelings.

The proud do not receive counsel or correction easily. (See Prov. 15:10; Amos 5:10.) Defensiveness is used by them to justify and rationalize their frailties and failures. (See Matt. 3:9; John 6:30–59.)

I have heard Mormons say many times that "contention is of the devil." While there are wrong types of contention, there are also righteous parts. Some Mormons will not listen to anyone who disagrees with their theology, which suggests that they don't want to entertain any opposition to their faith. However, disagreeing with someone is not "contention."

In fact, the Bible says "contend for the faith delivered once for all unto the saints." (Jude 3) The proud are indeed easily offended and hold grudges. I urge my LDS friends to not allow this potential attitude to interfere with hearing what is said by those with whom they might disagree. The proof is in the pudding. Beware of pride.

Chapter 19: Leadership

People respond to effective leadership.

Humility

One of the marks of great leadership always has been and ever will be the humble spirit.

Just for fun, let's see how well Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon religion, performed with the character traits talked about in the first half of this chapter. For "humility," read what Joseph Smith himself was quoted as saying:

> "I have more to boast of than ever any man had. I am the only man that has ever been able to keep a whole church together since the days of Adam. A large majority of the whole have stood by me. Neither Paul, John, Peter, nor Jesus ever did it. I boast that no man ever did such a work as I. The followers of Jesus ran away from Him; but the Latter-day Saints never ran away from me yet" (May 26, 1844, *History of the Church* 6:408-409).
>
> "God made Aaron to be the mouthpiece for the children of Israel, and He will make me be god to you in His stead, and the Elders to be mouth for me; and if you don't like it, you must lump it" (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 363).
>
> "I combat the errors of the ages; I meet the violence of mobs; I cope with illegal proceedings from executive authority; I cut the Gordian knot of powers; and I solve mathematical problems of Universities: WITH TRUTH, diamond truth, and God is my 'right hand man'" (Joseph Smith, *Times and Seasons* 4:375).

Feel free to look these quotes up, but he really did say these. Joseph Smith's obvious grade on "Humility": F

Spiritual strength

Spiritual strength promotes positive thinking, positive ideals, positive habits, positive attitudes, and positive efforts. These are the qualities which promote wisdom, physical and mental well-being, and enthusiastic acceptance and response by others.

Only the wholesome have the capacity to lift and encourage one another to greater service, to greater achievement, to greater strength.

Inspiration is essential to properly lead. … We must have the spirit of inspiration whether we are teaching (D&C 50:13–14) or administering the affairs of the kingdom (D&C 46:2).

OK, let's put Smith to the test once more using several historical books written by Latter-day Saints:

> "Mary Elizabeth Rollins claimed that Joseph had a private conversation with her in 1831; she was then twelve years old. She said Joseph 'told me about his great vision concerning me. He said I was the first woman God commanded him to take as a plural wife.' Although she did not become a plural wife of Joseph's until a number of years later, that early conversation planted a seed that Mary Elizabeth long remembered" (*Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith*, p. 65)

> "When the Smiths moved to Ohio in 1831, Joseph there met the majority of his future wives. Most of them were still adolescents—the children of close associates" (*Nauvoo Polygamy*, p. 29)

> "In most cases, the women were adolescents or in their twenties when he met them. About ten were pre-teens, others already thirty or above. . . If other words, for over a decade prior to Smith's first plural marriages, he met and established relationships with those who would later become his wives" (Ibid., p. 35)

By courting other women who were not his wives—even teens!—Joseph Smith ought to be considered an adulterer rather than a hero. Yet he even lied about his many marriages in May 1844, just a month before he died. He said,

> "What a thing it is for a man to be accused of committing adultery, and having seven wives, when I can only find one" (*History of the Church* 6:411).

Actually, Smith had between 30-40 wives, as so admitted in the LDS Church-produced Gospel Topics essay titled "Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo," as published on the lds.org website.

Integrity? Joseph Smith was not even close. Thus, Smith receives an "F" for "positive habits," being "wholesome," and properly lead(ing)" his people closer to God. For more information on this topic, visit the website www.JosephsWives.com.

Knowledge

A genuine leader tries to stay well informed. He is a person who acts on principle rather than expediency. He tries to learn from all human experience measured against revealed principles of divine wisdom.

One of the best ways for leaders to understand correct principles is to have a thorough knowledge and understanding of the scriptures and the appropriate handbook. Most situations have already arisen before, perhaps many times, and policy and procedure have already been determined to handle the problem. It is always wise, therefore, to refer to and be familiar with existing written instructions and Church policy on questions as they arise.

Leaders are counseled to study the doctrines of the Church so as to be able to adequately represent our doctrines to others. To use the Apostle Paul's phraseology, we expect you to be a "workman that needeth not to be ashamed" (2 Timothy 2:15).

Joseph Smith provided heretical teachings about God. For example:

> "I will go back to the beginning before the world was, to show what kind of being God is. What sort of a being was God in the beginning? Open your ears and hear, all ye ends of the earth, for I am going to prove it to you by the Bible, and to tell you the designs of God in relation to the human race, and why He interferes with the affairs of man. *God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret, if the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by his power, was to make himself visible,—I say, if you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form—like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man; for Adam was created in the very fashion, image and likeness of God, and received instruction from, and walked, talked and conversed with him, as one man talks and communes with another"* (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 345. Italics in original. See also *Achieving a Celestial Marriage*, p. 129).
>
> "We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea, and take away the veil, so that you may see. These are incomprehensible ideas to some, but they are simple. *It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the Character of God, and to know that we may converse with him as one man converses with another, and that he was once a man like us; yea, that God the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did, and I will show it from the Bible"* (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, pp. 345-346. Italics in original. See also *Gospel Principles,* 1997, p. 305).
>
> "If Jesus Christ was the Son of God, and John discovered that God the Father of Jesus Christ had a Father, you may suppose that He had a Father also. Where was there ever a son without a father? And where was there ever a father without first being a son? Whenever did a tree or anything spring into existence without a progenitor? And everything comes in this way. Paul says that which is earthly is in the likeness of that

> which is heavenly, Hence if Jesus had a Father, can we not believe that He had a Father also?" (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 373.)
>
> "That which is without body or parts is nothing. There is no God in heaven but that God who has flesh and bones" (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church – Joseph Smith*, p. 42).

For his heretical views and lack of knowledge about God, Joseph Smith receives, yes, another "F." This makes him three for three, so far.

Loyalty

A good leader expects loyalty. He in turn gives his loyalty. He backs up those to whom he has given a job. The loyalty extends to matters beyond the call of duty. He is loyal when honors come to those with whom he serves. He takes pride in their successes. He does not overrule unless he first confers with him whose decision he overrules. He does not embarrass an associate before others. He is frank and open with him.18

You would think a man ought to be loyal to his wife. In Joseph Smith's case, however, he betrayed Emma numerous times. Consider these quotes when it came to Smith's polygamous ways:

> "Emma took nineteen-year-old Fanny Alger into her home early in 1835. . . .William McLelline told his account of Joseph and Fanny Alger to a newspaper in 1875. "[McLellin]. . . informed me of the spot where the first well authenticated case of polygamy took place, in which Joseph Smith was 'sealed' to the hired girl. The 'sealing' took place in a barn on the hay mow, and we witnessed by Mrs. Smith through a crack in the door! . . . She 'saw him and Fanny in the barn together alone. She looked through the crack and saw the transaction!!!" (Ibid., p. 66)
>
> "Joseph kept his relationship with Loiusa Beaman secret from all but a select few. He also kept it secret from Emma. His earlier attempts to begin the practice in Kirtland had presented severe trauma for Emma, and Joseph knew that she would not willingly share him with another woman" (Ibid., p. 95)
>
> "Joseph's choice of women as plural wives gradually put a wedge between Emma and her friends as long as she remained either ignorant of the practice or opposed it. By late summer 1843p most of Emma's friends had either married Joseph or had given their daughters to him. . . . At least five women in her own household were Joseph's plural wives. . . . As a result, she [Emma] became isolated from her friends and associates, and through the next four years this isolation would become more and more acute" (Ibid., p. 147)

Smith deceived Emma many times and even got caught by her as he and a teenage girl were having sex in the hay. Any man who would do such things to his wife, deceiving her on multiple occasions, is not someone who ought to be trusted, especially for eternity. Hence, when it comes to loyalty, Joseph Smith receives still another "F" grade.

Unity

There is a "union required by the law of the celestial kingdom; And Zion cannot be built up unless it is by the principles of the law of the celestial kingdom." (D&C 105:4–5.) Among the required principles and attributes is a unity of mind and heart. "I say unto you, be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine," is the Savior's injunction to His modern Church (D&C 38:27; John 17:20–23). Nowhere is this requirement more essential than among those whom He has called to preside throughout His kingdom.

"A love of people is essential to effective leadership."

Love and expressions of confidence

A love of people is essential to effective leadership. Do you love those whom you work with? Do you realize the worth of souls is great in the sight of God (see D&C 18:10)? Do you have faith in youth? Do you find yourself praising their virtues, commending them for their accomplishments? Or do you have a critical attitude toward them because of their mistakes?

Even harder to bear than criticism, oftentimes, is no word from our leader on the work to which we have been assigned. Little comments or notes, which are sincere and specific, are great boosters along the way.

We know … that the time a leader spends in personal contact with members is more productive than time spent in meetings and administrative duties. Personal contact is the key to converting the inactive member.

In the Church especially, asking produces better results than ordering—better feeling, too. Remember to tell why. Follow up to see how things are going. Show appreciation when people carry out instructions well. Express confidence when it can be done honestly. When something gets fouled up, it is well to check back and find out where you slipped up—and don't be afraid to admit that you did. Remember, our people are voluntary, free-will workers. They also love the Lord and His work. Love them. Appreciate them. When you are tempted to reprimand a fellow worker, don't. Try an interesting challenge and a pat on the back instead. Our Father's children throughout the world are essentially good. He loves them. We should also.

People do not like to be forced to do anything, even if it is for their own good. But people do respond to effective leadership.

When it comes to "love for people," we must wonder why so many people hated Joseph Smith. Whether he was in Kirtland, Ohio (where he skipped town and left behind a failed banking venture), Missouri (the citizens put him in a prison cell for the atrocities committed against the Missourian people), or Nauvoo, where an angry mob ended up killing Smith—could he have fired the first shot? Then he ended up killing two men in the gun battle that, many Mormons argue, ought to be considered a "martyrdom." (For more on that issue, click here.)

And as explained above, Smith had no problem taking other men's wives (10 of his wives were married to living husbands) or young teens (a third of his wives were teens when he married them), wedding and then bedding them to make them his. Selfish actions? Indeed. Does this sound like a man who had "love for people"? Hardly. Smith was more about himself than those he supposedly served.

Jesus aimed to exalt the individual. …

Jesus aimed to make of every man a king, to build him in leadership into eternity. On that memorable night after the last supper, He said to the eleven … , "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth in me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father." (John 14:12.) Through delegating, Jesus desired to lift, rather than suppress, the individual. And all through the Church today, men and women are growing in stature through positions delegated to them.

During His mortal ministry, Jesus Christ delegated authority to His Twelve Apostles.

When Joseph Smith died, he left behind no plans for a successor. What ensued over the next two years was a political wrestling match for control. Sidney Rigdon and Brigham Young both felt they were the rightful heirs. In addition, Smith's family stayed behind and eventually the Reorganized Latter-day Saint (RLDS) church was instituted, later led by Smith's son. A wise leader would have had contingency plans, especially since he supposedly said (as claimed by many Latter-day Saints) that he was "like a lamb led to the slaughter."

We must remember that … the Church … is not the business world. Its success is measured in terms of souls saved, not in profit and loss. We need, of course, to be efficient and productive, but we also need to keep our focus on eternal objectives. Be cautious about imposing secular methods and terminology on sacred priesthood functions. Remember that rational problem-solving procedures, though helpful, will not be solely sufficient in the work of the kingdom. God's work must be done by faith, prayer, and by the Spirit, "and if it be by some other way it is not of God" (D&C 50:18).

This last part of the chapter is fascinating. "The Church is not the business world," it reads. The facts say otherwise. For instance, the church's earnings each year would put it in the upper

echelon of a Fortune 500 company. It has land ownings, stocks, buildings, and so much more. It is run like a business, and a well-oiled one at that.

Although the information now dated, the Ostlings had a chapter titled "Mormons, Inc." in their book *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise* (Harper, 1999) where they laid out some of the financial clout of this "church." Remember, this information covers the mid-1990s (two decades ago from when I wrote this piece) and wasn't published until 1999. On pages 114-115, they wrote,

> What makes the LDS Church distinctive is not just the amount of money coursing through its congregations each week–though that is also singular for the size of the denomination–but the church's heavy investments in corporate enterprises. . . . its investments in stocks, bonds, and church-controlled businesses were worth $6 billion as of 1997, and that church-owned agricultural and commercial real estate has a value of an additional $5 billion. . . . The worth of other categories of assets: U.S. meetinghouses and temples, $12 billion; foreign meetinghouses and temples, $6 billion; schools and miscellaneous, $1 billion. The estimated grand total of LDS assets, by a conservative reckoning, would be $25-30 billion. If assets have appreciated as much as they should have in recent times, the figure could go well beyond that.

Of course, a decade and a half has passed since these researchers wrote the above. The church has more than four million more followers since 1999 (more than a quarter of its current membership), as well as close to double the temples and thousands more buildings. What would that number equal today? How is this money being used to further the spiritual kingdom of God?

The LDS Church does not disclose its financial position. It doesn't have to because it is a "nonprofit" organization. Listen to what the researchers have to say about this:

> The strict secrecy with which the hierarchy guards the financial facts is unique for a church of this size. Officials refuse to divulge routine information that other religions are happy to provide over the phone to donors or inquirers. Outsiders' money estimates always raise disclaimers from officialdom, presumably because of the danger that fat-looking figures might weaken members' tithing compliance. This has led to a cat-and-mouse game with various journalists who have attempted over the years to unveil the vast empire of corporate Mormonism.

If this secrecy seems strange, it's because this is not typical with most Christian ministries. The reputable ministries I know have open books and allow audits from agencies like EFCA, an independent auditor. Donors are encouraged to see how the money is spent. Not so with the Mormon Church. The Ostlings continue on page 118:

> Typically churches spend most of what they take in and maintain modest "rainy day" margins. Not so the Mormons. Their enterprises range from a $16 billion insurance company to perhaps $16 billion in stocks and bonds, if not more. There is a $172 million chain of radio stations (seventh-largest in the country). The church's more than 150 farms and ranches, including America's largest cattle ranch, make it one of the largest landowners in the nation. The farms and ranches encompass somewhere in the neighborhood of one million acres, roughly equal to the state of Delaware. The talented church managers run a tight and profitable ship and can spend the cash any way they choose. They are not held accountable to the unquestioning flock in any way.

The whole purpose of the Church is to build men and women who will be godlike in their attitudes and in their attributes and in their ideals.

Benson is quoted as saying that the Mormon Church's "whole purpose" "is to build men and women who will be godlike in their attitudes." Yet what I find that the church does instill Pharisaical pride in people. General conference plays twice a year where members can hear the "do your best and then do better" talks. Keeping covenants is how a "good" Mormon is measured. Members are interviewed by their leaders to see if they are "worthy" to attend the temple. Only those jumping through the hoops are given the necessary recommend cards required to enter therein. And what is one of the requirements? Paying the tithe–the full ten percent. Consider what the Ostlings wrote on tithing in their chapter "Mormons, Inc.":

Yet another LDS trademark is the system of membership tithing that brings in what we project as offerings of $5.3 billion a year, though one knowledgeable source thinks $4.25 billion might be a safer estimate. Stocks and directly owned businesses produce perhaps $600 million more in cash income. The estimated yearly annual revenues total $5.9 billion, or by the more conservative reckoning, just under $5 billion.

Imagine how much more the church receives each year in current times, with more than four million members than there were at the time of that writing! Inflation also ought to be considered. If my own estimates are correct, I think the number of tithing dollars is easily more than $10 billion a year (no question) in 2015 dollars. This church is so good at collecting the tithe that, if a person hasn't done so, the church can require tithing settlement , which is a payment of back tithes. If this isn't done, then the member will have to say good-bye to the temple recommend and possibly miss the right for them to see their own child's wedding!

Based on the information above, money is what makes this church go round. Meanwhile, many hard-working volunteers are not compensated for their duties, including the bishops, who act like Christian pastors and certainly put in several dozen hours (minimum) per week. Asking a man to be a husband while raising a family, keeping a full-time job, and then holding what amounts to another full-time job (running a church of 200 members) is asking for the impossible. And all of

this is expected, with no pay. Yet the Bible says in 1 Timothy 5:18, "For Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain,' and 'The worker deserves his wages.'" And D&C 42:71-73 says that bishops (as well as elders and high priests who assist these bishops) are to receive "a just remuneration for all their services," while D&C 75:24 specifically names certain men who were called missionaries and states that "it is the duty of the church to assist in supporting the families of those [missionaries], and also to support the families of those who are called and must needs be sent unto the world to proclaim the gospel unto the world." Is there a disconnect here?

Truly, the church's coffers in Salt Lake City seem to be well lined. Money and investments are piled up to do…what? I can't see Jesus encouraging Peter and the disciples to build a Fortune 500 company while keeping their finances hidden. Yet the LDS Church membership allows their leaders to stockpile money and investments? Something is wrong.

Contrary to what the Mormon may believe, I believe that the whole purpose of the Mormon Church is to give the elite power while providing no hope for the members by working them overtime and not even giving them any chance to think on their own. In my experience, this "church" completely fulfills Jesus's words in Matthew 23 when He addressed the Jewish leaders. This is what He said two millennia ago:

> 13 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.
>
> 15 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.
>
> 16 "Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath.' 17 You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? 18 You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath.' 19 You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 Therefore, anyone who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. 21 And anyone who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. 22 And anyone who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.
>
> 23 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of

the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. [24] You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

[25] "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. [26] Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. [27] "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. [28] In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

[29] "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. [30] And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' [31] So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets.[32] Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started!

[33] "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? [34] Therefore I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. [35] And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. [36] Truly I tell you, all this will come on this generation.

So much about Mormonism concerns outward appearances. Consider how Latter-day Saints are expected to dress for church: Buttoned (white) shirts, ties, slacks, and dress shoes for the men. Dresses (covering the knee) for the women. They look great on the outside, but will the individual be convicted to work on the inside? This is just a start. I live in Utah and so much in everyday life here is superficial.

As long as a Mormon family has a nice-looking yard, doesn't run its mower or play sports on Sundays, and waves are offered to all the neighbors as they drive by, then everything is fine. Meanwhile, there are people in this church who are spiritually dead in trying to do enough good, desiring freedom from human regulations and the standards of fifteen men living in Salt Lake City. How do I know? I have talked to many, many former Latter-day Saints who have left this life of slavery and discovered an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ that gave them the freedom they were looking for.

I believe the leaders of the LDS Church are much closer in nature to Joseph Smith than they are to Jesus Christ. My prayer is for the Mormon people to recognize that trusting in this organization will get them nowhere.

Chapter 20: “Feed my Sheep”

As followers of the Lord, part of our mission is to reach out to our brothers and sisters who have separated themselves from the Church.

The purpose of the Lord’s church is to further the progress of every son and daughter of God toward the ultimate blessings of eternal life. …

> When I read this introduction to the doctrinal context of the chapter, I immediately thought of this exchange in John 21 between the resurrected Jesus and the disciple Peter–obviously meant by Benson and the editors of this manual:
>
> **15** When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”
>
> “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”
>
> Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”
>
> **16** Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”
>
> He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”
>
> Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”
>
> **17** The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”
>
> Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”
>
> Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. **18** Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” **19** Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”

The title of this chapter is “Feed my sheep.” Consider the job of a shepherd who is in charge of his sheep. (You can still spot shepherds with their flocks throughout the Holy Land when traveling in Israel!) He was expected to:

- Feed and water the animals, guiding them to green pastures

- Protect the animals from harm at the paws of predators
- Ensure their well-being, regardless of the circumstances.

According to Benson, the "mission" is to guide lost souls (either formerly in the church or living as "Jack Mormons") back to Mormonism. The goal "is to further the progress of every son and daughter of God toward the ultimate blessings of eternal life. …"

We must ask, what is eternal life in Mormonism? It is synonymous with exaltation, or godhood. Apostle Jeffrey R. Holland explained,

> We are charged with the responsibility of getting people out of their ruts and routines, out of their problems and their pain, out of their little arguments and ignorance and sins, and take them to the Gods – to the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost – ultimately we are to take them toward their own Godhood ("Divine Companion: Teaching by the Spirit," *Church News*, July 4, 2009, p. 15).

Apparently most Latter-day Saints shouldn't expect to get the very best this religion has to offer. Tenth President Joseph Fielding Smith explained,

> NOT HALF THE LATTER-DAY SAINTS TO BE SAVED. Those who receive the *fulness* will be privileged to view the face of our Father. *There will not be such an overwhelming number of the Latter-day Saints who will get there.* President Francis M. Lyman many times has declared, and he had reason to declare, I believe, that if we save one-half of the Latter-day Saints, that is, with an exaltation in the celestial kingdom of God, we will be doing well. Not that the Lord is partial, not that he will draw the line as some will say, to keep people out. He would have every one of us go in if we would; but there are laws and ordinances that we must keep; if we do not observe the law we cannot enter (Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* 2:15. Italics in original).

He also said,

> To enter the celestial and obtain exaltation it is necessary that the whole law be kept . . . . Do you desire to enter into the celestial Kingdom and receive eternal life? Then be willing to keep all of the commandments the Lord may give you (*The Way to Perfection*, p. 206).

Can you imagine the shepherd of a flock of sheep telling his boss, "Sir, you gave me 100 sheep and I was able to get some of them back to the pen. I just lost most of them." Would the boss be happy? I doubt it. Instead, he would surely scream, "Didn't I put you in charge of one hundred? How could you lose so many?" Imagine if the shepherd responded, "It's all the sheep's fault.

They should have obeyed every rule I gave them and then they wouldn't have starved or had the wolves get to them!" Such a shepherd should (and would) be fired!

In Mormonism, the onus is placed squarely on the backs of those who buy into the philosophy that salvation is based on their good works. It is such a different message given in biblical Christianity! Instead, the onus is placed on Christ's back, who paid for the believer's sins once and for all. Jesus taught the Pharisees in John 10,

> 25 Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify about me, 26 but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. 27 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all;no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.

Notice, "I [Jesus] give them eternal life." It's not something that can be earned. And they will never perish. No wolf will get them. In Mormonism, the greatest danger for the individual is when this person is unable to keep the commandments and thus fails to qualify for the celestial kingdom.

If you don't know what it means to have a relationship with the true Shepherd, I invite you to come into His arms today.

I wish to discuss our mission to perfect the Saints, particularly the challenge of activating those who have separated themselves from full activity in the Church. These members, who are our brothers and sisters, at present live apart from the Church and the influence of the gospel.

LDS Apostle Dallin H. Oaks told a general conference audience,

> As part of His great Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). The purpose of this teaching and the purpose of following our Savior is to come to the Father, whom our Savior referred to as 'my Father, and your Father, and . . . my God, and your God" (John 20:17). From modern revelation, unique to the restored gospel, we know that the commandment to seek perfection is part of God the Father's plan for the salvation of His children ("Followers of Christ," *Ensign* (Conference Edition*),* May 2013, p. 98. Ellipsis in original).

Seventy Jorge F. Zeballos taught,

> Even when, from a purely human perspective, perfection can appear an impossible challenge to achieve, I testify that our Father and our Savior have made known to us that it is possible to achieve the impossible. Yes, it is possible to achieve eternal life. Yes, it is

> possible to be happy now and forever (Jorge F. Zeballos, "Attempting the Impossible," *Ensign* (Conference Edition), November 2009, p. 35).

A church manual reports,

> Jesus said, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Because it is very difficult to become perfect, our Father helps us. He has established the Church; called leaders; and given us commandments, principles, and ordinances. In our Church meetings we receive instructions concerning these things. We must obey and live according to God's laws to become perfect (*The Latter-day Saint Woman Part A*, p. 122).

Another church manual quotes fifth President Lorenzo Snow as saying, "With diligence, patience, and divine aid, we can obey the Lord's command to be perfect" (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Lorenzo Snow*, p. 95).

Many times leaders and manuals have made it appear that perfection can be achieved in this lifetime. However, some recognize how impossible this goal–no matter how hard a person tries–really is. The temptation is then to minimize the commandment. Tenth President Joseph Fielding Smith taught,

> The Savior's words in the Sermon on the Mount, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect," evidently have been by many misapplied or limited in their application. The Savior knew that mortal man could not reach the great goal of perfection like his Heavenly Father, but here in mortality is the place where that foundation should be laid. Then we should continue on from grace to grace, not only in this life but also in the eternities to come, and it is within the possibility of any faithful soul eventually to attain to that perfection" (*Selections from Answers to Gospel Questions: A Course of Study for the Melchizedek Priesthood Quorum 1972-73*, p. 291).

According to Smith and others, perfection may not be reached in this lifetime but work can somehow be completed "in the eternities." (Imagine the surprise of an LDS bishop who is told in a temple recommend interview, "Bishop, it's true I'm not keeping the Word of Wisdom because I like an occasional beer and coffee, but heck, I've got the eternities to work on this"! I doubt the person would get the recommend.) The idea that work toward perfection can happen into the "eternities" contradicts the Book of Mormon. Alma 34:32ff explains:

> **32** For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors.

> **33** And now, as I said unto you before, as ye have had so many witnesses, therefore, I beseech of you that ye do not procrastinate the day of your repentance until the end; for after this day of life, which is given us to prepare for eternity, behold, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed.
>
> **34** Ye cannot say, when ye are brought to that awful crisis, that I will repent, that I will return to my God. Nay, ye cannot say this; for that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, that same spirit will have power to possess your body in that eternal world.
>
> **35** For behold, if ye have procrastinated the day of your repentance even until death, behold, ye have become subjected to the spirit of the devil, and he doth seal you his; therefore, the Spirit of the Lord hath withdrawn from you, and hath no place in you, and the devil hath all power over you; and this is the final state of the wicked.

The idea that perfection could be completed at a later time certainly isn't what twelfth LDS President Spencer W. Kimball taught:

> This progress toward eternal life is a matter of achieving perfection. Living all the commandments guarantees total forgiveness of sins and assures one of exaltation through that perfection which comes by complying with the formula the Lord gave us. In his Sermon on the Mount he made the command to all men: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." (Matt. 5:48.) Being perfect means to triumph over sin. This is a mandate from the Lord. He is just and wise and kind. He would never require anything from his children which was not for their benefit and which was not attainable. Perfection therefore is an achievable goal (Spencer W. Kimball*, The Miracle of Forgiveness*, pp. 208-209).

In Kimball's mind, the idea was simple: Overcome sin and you will achieve perfection. Though it is a simple idea, it certainly wouldn't be easy, as he elsewhere described the process:

> In the context of the spirit of forgiveness, one good brother asked me, "Yes, that is what ought to be done, but how do you do it? Doesn't that take a superman?" "Yes," I said, "but we are commanded to be supermen. Said the Lord, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." (Matt. 5:48.) We are gods in embryo, and the Lord demands perfection of us (Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, p. 286).

And he also said this:

> I would emphasize that the teachings of Christ that we should become perfect were not mere rhetoric. He meant literally that it is the right of mankind to become like the Father and like the Son, having overcome human weaknesses and developed attributes of divinity (*The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, p. 26).

A Mormon is free to rationalize Matthew 5:48 any way he or she wishes. However, the idea most Mormons with whom I have spoken have is that the requirements are on us in this lifetime. Ask Latter-day Saints what happens if they were to die right now, and typically they have no clue whether or not they would qualify for the celestial kingdom. Most readily admit they are nothing more than "telestial" world material, thus fulfilling Joseph Fielding Smith's comment from above where he said that half of the Latter-day Saints won't qualify for celestial glory.

In this group of less-active members are many non-attenders who may be indifferent and non-caring. Also included are those who are temporarily lost because we do not know their whereabouts. Some of these are new converts who apparently did not receive the nurturing attention and teachings that would have caused them to be "fellow citizens with the Saints." (See Eph. 2:19.) Many are single adults.

I find Benson's last comment interesting. "Many are single adults," he said. What could he have meant by this comment? Latter-day Saints are instructed that the only way to enter the celestial kingdom is through marriage for "time and eternity." Quoted in a church manual, second President Brigham Young taught:

> We find quite a large number of young people who have arrived at a marriageable age and still they remain single. . . . Our young men and women should consider their obligations to each other, to God, the earth, their parents, and to future generations for their salvation and exaltation among the Gods and for the glory of Him whom we serve (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young*, p. 164. Ellipses in original).

Another manual quotes sixth President Joseph F. Smith:

> Marriage is . . . a principle or ordinance of the gospel, most vital to the happiness of mankind, however unimportant it may seem, or lightly regarded by many. There is no superfluous or unnecessary principle in the plan of life, but there is no principle of greater importance or more essential to the happiness of man—not only here, but especially hereafter, than that of marriage (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith*, p. 176. Ellipses in original).

Warning those who don't get married, tenth President Joseph Fielding Smith stated:

> Unless young people who marry outside the temple speedily repent, they cut themselves off from exaltation in the celestial kingdom of God. If they should prove themselves worthy, notwithstanding that great error, to enter into the celestial kingdom, they go in that kingdom as servants. What does that mean? The revelation tells us they go into that kingdom to be servants to those who are worthy of a more highly exalted position—something with greater glory. They are servants to them. They are not joint heirs with Jesus Christ. They do not obtain the kingdom that is, the crown and the glory of the kingdom of God. When they come forth in the resurrection, they have no claim upon each other, or their children upon them, and there will be weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth (Joseph Fielding Smith, *Selections from Answers to Gospel Questions: A Course of Study for the Melchizedek Priesthood Quorum 1972-73*, p. 265).

He also said,

> Delayed marriage . . . is not fully acceptable. All normal people should plan their lives to include a proper temple marriage in their early life and to multiply and have their families in the years of their early maturity (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball*, p. 195. Ellipses in original)

All of the above quotes are cited in church manuals from the past forty years. And current leaders teach the same. For example, consider Russell M. Nelson, President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles:

> To qualify for eternal life, we must make an eternal and everlasting covenant with our Heavenly Father. This means that a temple marriage is not only between husband and wife; it embraces a partnership with God ("Celestial Marriage," *Ensign* (Conference Edition), November 2008, p. 93).
>
> On occasion, I read in a newspaper obituary of an expectation that a recent death has reunited that person with a deceased spouse, when, in fact, they did not choose the eternal option. Instead, they opted for a marriage that was valid only as long as they both should live. Heavenly Father has offered them a supernal gift, but they refused it. And in rejecting the gift, they rejected the Giver of the gift ("Celestial Marriage," *Ensign* (Conference Edition), November 2008, p. 93).
>
> Celestial marriage is a pivotal part of preparation for eternal life. It requires one to be married to the right person, in the right place, by the right authority, and to obey that sacred covenant faithfully. Then one may be assured of exaltation in the celestial kingdom of God ("Celestial Marriage," *Ensign* (Conference Edition), November 2008, p. 94).

And Apostle Dallin H. Oaks stated in 2011:

> Under the great plan of the living Creator, the mission of His Church is to help us achieve exaltation in the celestial kingdom, and that can be accomplished only through an eternal marriage between a man and a woman (see D&C 131:1-3) (Dallin H. Oaks, "Fundamental to Our Faith," *Ensign*, January 2011, pp. 25-26).

And just for good measure, here are teachings from other church manuals:

> The ordinance of temple marriage is also necessary for us to become like our Father in Heaven. Temple marriage makes it possible for us to have eternal families. When we receive this ordinance worthily and keep the covenants we make, our families will be blessed to live together throughout eternity (*Duties and Blessings of the Priesthood: Basic Manual for Priesthood Holders*, Part B, p. 33).
>
> He has revealed that one of the purposes of marriage is to provide mortal bodies for His spirit children. Parents are partners with our Heavenly Father. He wants each of His spirit children to receive a physical body and to experience earth life. When a man and a woman bring children into this world, they help our Heavenly Father carry out His plan (*Gospel Principles*, 2009, p. 207).
>
> Families can be together forever. To enjoy this blessing we must be married in the temple. When people are married outside the temple, the marriage ends when one of the partners dies. When we are married in the temple by the authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood, we are married for time and eternity. If we keep our covenants with the Lord, our families will be united eternally as husband, wife, and children. Death cannot separate us (*Gospel Principles*, 2009, p. 209).
>
> Our exaltation depends on marriage, along with other principles and ordinances, such as faith, repentance, baptism, and receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost. We believe that marriage is the most sacred relationship that can exist between a man and a woman. This sacred relationship affects our happiness now and in the eternities (*Gospel Principles*, 2009, p. 219).
>
> Without each other, men and women cannot fulfill the purposes for which they were created (see 1 Corinthians 11:11; Moses 3:18, 24). Only through temple marriage can men and women receive every eternal blessing (see D&C 131:1–4; 132:15–18) (*Preparing for an Eternal Marriage Teacher Manual Religion 234*, p. 54).

What the Latter-day Saint needs to understand is that support for this teaching can be found in neither the Bible nor the Book of Mormon, for that matter. It can only be found in the Doctrine and Covenants. This fact is confirmed by BYU professor Charles Harrell:

> . . . the concept of eternal marriage isn't found anywhere in the Book of Mormon or other Latter-day scripture prior to 1843. It was in Nauvoo, in the summer of 1843, that Joseph Smith formally introduced the 'new and everlasting covenant of marriage' (D&C 132), which initially entailed plural marriage ("*This is my Doctrine': The Development of Mormon Theology*, p. 318).

If getting married for "time and eternity" is so important, then shouldn't the doctrine be supported in ancient scripture, whether it's the Bible or even Mormonism's unique Book of Mormon. Ancient Jews and Nephites had no idea that getting married was required for godhood and the celestial kingdom!

No matter how it is put, the pressure on single people is great. Imagine if you are into your thirties and, for whatever the reason, you have not yet found a partner. In the Mormon Church, the pickings will be sparse, as most eligible Latter-day Saints seem to be married by the time they are 25. Hearing what the leaders and the manuals say, it sure seems pretty clear that marriage is a requirement for the celestial kingdom.

Life for a single person would not seem so abundant and full, as Jesus promised in John 10:10b. But why should being single be a curse? After all, what if a person chooses to be single? This certainly seemed to be a realistic possibility for the Christian believer, according to Paul. First Corinthians 7:7-9 says,

> 7 I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one
> has this gift, another has that. 8 Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for
> them to stay unmarried, as I do. 9 But if they cannot control themselves, they should
> marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

First of all, Paul says that he wished that they were as he was (single). If they are unmarried, they shouldn't look to get married. They should marry, however, if they don't have the ability and would only burn with lust. Explaining what he meant, Paul then goes on to say,

> 32 I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the
> Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. 33 But a married man is concerned about the
> affairs of this world—how he can please his wife— 34 and his interests are divided. An
> unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be
> devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the
> affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. 35 I am saying this for your own

> good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

He added,

> **37** But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin—this man also does the right thing. **38** So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better.[c]
>
> **39** A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord.**40** In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

As he stated in verse 17,

> **17** Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them.

If you are single, then the command is to live for Him. If you are married, then He desired to have you live for Him! Despite all of the LDS quotes listed above, a church manual confused the issue by making it appear that getting married might not have to be done in this life. It reads:

Some members of the Church remain single through no fault of their own, even though they want to marry. If you find yourself in this situation, be assured that "all things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8:28). As you remain worthy, you will someday, in this life or the next, be given all the blessings of an eternal family relationship. The Lord has made this promise repeatedly through His latter-day prophets (*True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference*, p. 99).

How can the manual suggest that getting married in the next life is a possibility? (Can you imagine the look of shock on a faithful Mormon parent's face when junior announces he plans to remain single because, "through no fault of his own," he can't find a marriage partner? Would they accept his excuse that, after all, "there is the next life"?) These words are confusing. Recognizing the sensitivity some single Latter-day Saints have, one teacher manual instructs,

> As you discuss this topic of eternal marriage, be aware that there are many righteous people, particularly sisters, who have not yet had the opportunity to enjoy the blessings of marriage. Some of your students may be suffering from the effects of a failed marriage or may be struggling in a current marriage. Although marriage is a requirement of the highest degree of the celestial kingdom, please be considerate of the feelings of your students (*The Gospel and the Productive Life Teacher Manual Religion 150*, p. 48).

Notice how this quote admits that "marriage is a requirement of the highest degree of the celestial kingdom." However, rather than saying that marriage can happen in the next life, it tells the instructor to "be considerate of the feelings of your students." Based on Alma 34 as quoted above, it seems pretty clear that there can be no work "performed" after this life. Even insinuating that marriage can take place in the next life lends no sympathy for the single person's plight if it must be performed in this life. It is rather cruel to suggest such a thing. Again, chapter and verse are needed to support the notion that there are possibilities of getting married after this life.

To all such individuals, we, as members of the Church and followers of the Lord, must extend and renew our love and heartfelt invitation to come back. "Come back. Come back and feast at the table of the Lord, and taste again the sweet and satisfying fruits of fellowship with the Saints." (Ensign, March 1986, p. 88.) The challenge before us is great. … We must exercise great faith, energy, and commitment if we are to reach these brothers and sisters. But we must do it. The Lord expects us to do it. And we will!

It seems that Benson is begging people to come back to a place (Mormonism) where there is no hope. For many who have gone inactive or even left the church, this appeal will probably fall on deaf ears.

As we seek to nurture those who have gone astray, we are to apply the Savior's teaching of the good shepherd.

Now is the time to apply the Savior's teaching of the good shepherd to the challenge before us of retrieving lost sheep and wayward lambs.

"How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray?

"And if [it] so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray." (Matt. 18:12–13.)

In Jesus' time, the Palestinian shepherd knew each of his sheep. The sheep knew his voice and trusted him. They would not follow a stranger. Thus, when called, the sheep would come to him. (See John 10:1–5, 14.)

At night, the shepherds would lead their sheep to a corral or a sheepfold. High walls surrounded the sheepfold, and thorns were placed on top of the walls to prevent wild animals and thieves from climbing over. Sometimes, however, a wild animal driven by hunger would leap over the walls into the midst of the sheep, frightening and threatening them.

Such a situation separated the true shepherd—one who loved his sheep—from the hireling who worked only for pay out of duty. The true shepherd was willing to give his life for the sheep. He would go in among the sheep and fight for their welfare. The hireling, on the other hand, valued his own personal safety above the sheep and would usually flee from the danger.

Jesus used this common illustration of His day to declare that He was the Good Shepherd, the True Shepherd. Because of His love for His brothers and sisters, He would willingly and voluntarily lay down His life for them. (See John 10:11–18.)

Jesus told a story about a wolf in sheep's clothing. This is what he said in Matthew 7:

> 15 "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they
> are ferocious wolves. 16 By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes
> from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but
> a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear
> good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.
> 20 Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

How can we tell the true sheep from the wolf? John explains in 1 John 4:1:

> Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from
> God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

We are to "test everything" (1 Thess. 5:21). The fruit will be evident. When the hireling runs away—according to Benson's story above—we can know that he had never sold out as a shepherd. How can we know if the Mormon leaders are teaching the truth? We look at the fruit. When it is understood that Mormonism denies or distorts every fundamental teaching of the historic Christian church as what is taught in the Bible, including the understanding of the Godhead, authority, and salvation, then we have a problem. If you are a faithful Latter-day Saint, could it be that you have been deceived?

Eventually the Good Shepherd did give His life for the sheep—for you and me, for us all.

Yes, the Good Shepherd (Jesus) did give His life for those who would believe in Him. It is only through this act that a person can know what it means to have eternal life.

The symbolism of the good shepherd is not without significant parallel in the Church today. The sheep need to be led by watchful shepherds. Too many are wandering. Some are being enticed away by momentary distractions. Others have become completely lost.

But if those shepherds are charlatans, then they ought to be avoided at all costs.

We realize, as in times past, that some of the sheep will rebel and are “as a wild flock which fleeth from the shepherd.” (Mosiah 8:21.) But most of our problems stem from lack of loving and attentive shepherding, and more shepherds must be developed.

With a shepherd’s care, our new members, those newly born into the gospel, must be nurtured by attentive friendshipping as they increase in gospel knowledge and begin living new standards. Such attention will help ensure that they will not return to old habits.

With a shepherd’s loving care, our young people, our young lambs, will not be as inclined to wander. And if they do, the crook of the shepherd’s staff—a loving arm and an understanding heart—will help retrieve them.

With a shepherd’s care, many of those who are now independent of the flock can still be reclaimed. Many who have married outside the Church and have assumed the life-styles of the world may respond to an invitation to return to the fold.

As we nurture friendships in our wards and branches, we help each other stay in the fold of the Good Shepherd.

Again, the assumption made is that the Mormon Church is the true “fold of the Good Shepherd.” But what if it’s not?

Chapter 21: Principles of Temporal and Spiritual Welfare

The Lord is anxious and willing to bless His people temporally and spiritually. I realize, my brethren and sisters, that in discussing temporal matters, the Lord has said:

"… all things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given unto you a law which was temporal. …" [D&C 29:34.]

The objective, of course, is spiritual. We live, however, in a material, physical, temporal world. …

The Christian worldview agrees with this teaching.

… Man is a dual being, temporal and spiritual, and in the early revelations to this people, the Lord took occasion, many times, to give direction and commandment regarding temporal matters. He directed the Saints and the leaders of the Church in the purchase of land and other property; in the construction of temples; even in the establishment of a printing press, and a store, and in the building of a boardinghouse for the "weary traveler" [see D&C 124:22–23]. In the great revelation known as the Word of Wisdom, he not only indicated what is good and what is not good for man, but he outlined a plan for the feeding of livestock, which, through more than a hundred years, has gradually been sustained through the scientific investigation of man [see D&C 89]. Whatever affects human welfare has always been and ever will be the concern of the Church. Our people have always been counseled in temporal affairs. …

It is important that we keep our thinking straight, my brothers and sisters. Let us ever keep in mind that all material things are but a means to an end, that the end is spiritual, although the Lord is anxious and willing to bless his people temporally. He has so indicated in many of the revelations. He has pointed out, time and time again, that we should pray over our crops, over our livestock, over our households, our homes, and invoke the Lord's blessings upon our material affairs. And he has promised that he will be there and ready and willing to bless us. …

… The Lord will not do for us what we can and should do for ourselves. But it is his purpose to take care of his Saints. Everything that concerns the economic, social, and spiritual welfare of the human family is and ever will be the concern of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

As we administer any aspect of the welfare program, the primary purpose for which it was established must be kept before us. That stated purpose is "to set up, insofar as it might be possible, a system under which the curse of idleness would be done away with, the evils of a dole abolished, and independence, industry, thrift, and self-respect be once more established amongst our people. The aim of the Church is to help the people to help themselves. Work is to be re-enthroned as the ruling principle of the lives of our Church membership."

The strength of the Church welfare program lies in every family following the inspired direction of the Church leaders to be self-sustaining through adequate preparation. God intends for his Saints to so prepare themselves "that the church [as the Lord has said] may stand independent above all other creatures beneath the celestial world." (D&C 78:14.)

The scriptural parable of the five wise and the five foolish virgins [see Matthew 25:1–13] is a reminder that one can wait too long before he attempts to get his spiritual and temporal house in order. Are we prepared?

There is nothing wrong with the Latter-day Saints wanting to take care of the temporal needs of their members. For those wanting relief but who are not members, it's much more difficult to get any assistance from the LDS Church, with certain restrictions for money, food, and clothes, as the organization requires those receiving aid to either be members or at least attenders of a local Mormon ward.

Of course, it's the church's money and their leaders can give (or not give) to anyone they want. I just don't see the same types of restrictions with Christian agencies. For instance, Christian Pro-Life organizations will supply the needs of any pregnant mother and even for time after the birth. Rescue missions (including the Salt Lake Rescue Mission, to which I personally endorse) feed and house even those who don't belong to a Christian church. Throughout the world Christian-based hospitals are available to anyone who needs help. Restrictions are rare unless a person is not willing to follow the rules of the donating organization.

Through energetic, purposeful, unselfish work, we obtain life's necessities and grow in godly attributes.

One of the first principles revealed to father Adam when he was driven out of the Garden of Eden was this: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground" (Gen. 3:19). All we obtain in life of a material nature comes as a product of labor and the providence of God. Work alone produces life's necessities.

Man is commanded by God to live by the sweat of his own brow, not someone else's.

Paul told Timothy that if a person is not willing to work, he should not eat. As the proverb states, give a man a fish and you'll feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you'll feed him for a lifetime. There is no substitute for hard work.

Ours is a gospel of work—purposeful, unselfish and rendered in the spirit of the true love of Christ.

Christians, meanwhile, believe in the gospel of grace.

Only thus may we grow in godly attributes. Only thus may we become worthy instruments in the hands of the Lord for blessing others through that power which can lead to changing the lives of men and women for the better.

In Mormonism, it is all about becoming worthy. In Christianity, it is all about Jesus making a person "worthy" by providing forgiveness of sins.

We should be humbly grateful for this challenge, this heritage, this opportunity for service and its abundant rewards. How fortunate are those who may follow the Lord's plan to develop this power and use it for the blessing of others. That is what the Christ did. That is what we are privileged to do.

Welfare recipients should work to the extent of their ability to earn commodity or fast offering assistance. When meaningful jobs are not provided, when people are not encouraged to work, a demoralizing Church dole would develop, and the purpose for which the welfare program was established would be undermined. It is a law of heaven, and one we haven't learned fully here on earth, that you cannot help people permanently by doing for them what they can do, and should do, for themselves.

We should ask the Lord's blessings on all our doings and should never do anything upon which we cannot ask His blessings. We should not expect the Lord to do for us what we can do for ourselves. I believe in faith and works, and that the Lord will bless more fully the man who works for what he prays for than He will the man who only prays.

Energetic, purposeful work leads to vigorous health, praiseworthy achievement, a clear conscience, and refreshing sleep. Work has always been a boon to man. May you have a wholesome respect for labor whether with head, heart, or hand. May you ever enjoy the satisfaction of honest toil. … You will never wish or dream yourself into heaven. You must pay the price in toil, in sacrifice, and righteous living.

Notice the last line: "You must pay the price in toil, in sacrifice, and righteous living." I believe the good work ethic in this temporal life should not be translated into what is expected for the spiritual life. In Mormonism, what a person does in this life translates into what is received in the next life. As discussed in so many of these reviews of *Teachings of Presidents of the Church*, this is just not the case when the teachings of the Bible are considered.

… The revelation to produce and store food may be as essential to our temporal welfare today as boarding the ark was to the people in the days of Noah. …

… Plan to build up your food supply just as you would a savings account. Save a little for storage each pay-check. Can or bottle fruit and vegetables from your gardens and orchards. Learn how to preserve food through drying and possibly freezing. Make your storage a part of your budget. Store seeds and have sufficient tools on hand to do the job. If you are saving and planning for a second car or a TV set or some item which merely adds to your comfort or pleasure, you may need to change your priorities. We urge you to do this prayerfully and do it now. …

Food storage is emphasized in Mormon wards. Collecting food (two years or more) and canning fruits and vegetables play a major role in many LDS families. If what Benson is saying is true, then why should anyone have to "do this prayerfully." If something is said by the LDS leadership, it appears that the need to do this is a command and not something left up to personal revelation.

Too often we bask in our comfortable complacency and rationalize that the ravages of war, economic disaster, famine, and earthquake cannot happen here. Those who believe this are either not acquainted with the revelations of the Lord, or they do not believe them. Those who smugly think these calamities will not happen, that they somehow will be set aside because of the righteousness of the Saints, are deceived and will rue the day they harbored such a delusion.

The Lord has warned and forewarned us against a day of great tribulation and given us counsel, through His servants, on how we can be prepared for these difficult times. Have we heeded His counsel? …

Be faithful, my brothers and sisters, to this counsel and you will be blessed—yes, the most blessed people in all the earth. You are good people. I know that. But all of us need to be better than we are. Let us be in a position so we are able to not only feed ourselves through the home production and storage, but others as well.

May God bless us to be prepared for the days which lie ahead, which may be the most severe yet.

LDS leaders are free to teach their people food storage. I have no problem with the concept. There is wisdom in being prepared for natural disasters. In fact, I lived in Southern California for several different firestorms where I lived. Having supplies on hand led to peace of mind during those times.

Here is something to consider, though. When a disaster does take place, how many nonMormons understand that their LDS neighbors keep so much food? I would say most people know this about Mormons. Could this teaching possibly endanger innocent LDS families? I would recommend that families who practice food storage keep this information to themselves.

Peace and contentment come into our hearts when we save a portion of our earnings and avoid unnecessary debt.

I would think Dave Ramsey, the radio financial planner who advocates no debt finances, would be jumping for joy at this teaching.

I would respectfully urge you to live by the fundamental principles of work, thrift, and self-reliance and to teach your children by your example. … Live within your own earnings. Put a portion of those earnings regularly into savings. Avoid unnecessary debt. Be wise by not trying to expand too rapidly. Learn to manage well what you have before you think of expanding further.

Many verses in the book of Proverbs could be used to agree with this teaching. Unfortunately, we live in a society that isn't patient and wants immediate gratification. Too many families purchase boats, TVs, and other items of convenience or luxury by using credit. Consider how the U.S. government practices deficit spending and taking this nation into trillions of dollars into debt. I encourage my children to not live in such a way. I agree with Benson and say "avoid unnecessary debt."

Many people do not believe that serious recession will ever come again. Feeling secure in their expectations of continuing employment and a steady flow of wages and salaries, they obligate their future income without thought of what they would do if they should lose their jobs or if their incomes were stopped for some other reason. But the best authorities have repeatedly said that we are not yet smart enough to control our economy without downward adjustments. Sooner or later these adjustments will come.

Another reason for increase in debt is even deeper and causes greater concern. This is the rise of materialism, as contrasted with commitment to spiritual values. Many a family, in order to make a "proper showing," will commit itself for a larger and more expensive house than is needed, in an expensive neighborhood. … With the rising standard of living, that temptation increases with each new gadget that comes on the market. The subtle, carefully planned techniques of modern advertising are aimed at the weakest points of consumer resistance. As a result, there is a growing feeling, unfortunately, that material things should be had now, without waiting, without saving, without self-denial.

Worse still, a large proportion of families with personal debt have no liquid assets [savings] whatsoever to fall back upon. What troubles they invite if their income should be suddenly cut off or seriously reduced! We all know of families who have obligated themselves for more than they could pay. There is a world of heartache behind such cases.

Money is a very divisive issue in the majority of families in today's society. Debt drives divisiveness. Once again, the borrower to servant to the lender.

Living beyond our means can create "a world of heartache."

Now I do not mean to say that all debt is bad. Of course not. Sound business debt is one of the elements of growth. Sound mortgage credit is a real help to a family that must borrow for a home.

Do not, I solemnly urge you, tie yourselves to payment of carrying charges that are often exorbitant. Save now and buy later, and you will be much further ahead. You will spare yourselves high interest and other payments, and the money you save may provide opportunity for you to buy later at substantial cash discounts.

… Resist the temptation to plunge into property far more pretentious or spacious than you really need.

How much better off you will be, especially young families just starting out, if first you buy a small house which you can expect to pay for in a relatively short time. …

Do not leave yourself or your family unprotected against financial storms. Forgo luxuries, for the time being at least, to build up savings. How wise it is to provide for the future education of your children and for your old age. …

Brothers and sisters, peace and contentment come into our hearts when we live within our means. God grant us the wisdom and the faith to heed the inspired counsel of the priesthood to get out of debt, to live within our means, and to pay as we go—in short, to "pay thy debt, and live."

With these last paragraphs, I would fully concur. Debt for consumer goods is not worth it. Wise financial planning will provide more opportunities for any family's future.

Chapter 22: Carrying the Gospel to the World

Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Ezra Taft Benson, (2014), 275–86

"We are happy to be engaged in a partnership with our Heavenly Father in the great work of the salvation and exaltation of his children."

This opening sets the tone for this chapter. As an Evangelical Christian, I would never say I am "engaged in a partnership" with God. It is not biblical to suggest that humans can achieve exaltation, which is equal to godhood.

Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson

The world is hungry for true religion, and we have it.

I don't believe the world is "hungry for true religion." Rather, I think people are hungry for *truth*. Mormonism certainly is a religion, but if it's not based on truth, it is a false panacea. In my understanding, "religion" is man reaching out for God. Christianity, however, stresses how God reaches out for people, as laid out by the 66 books of the Bible that tells the story of God's love for people.

Following the glorious appearance of God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ to Joseph Smith,

Benson is assuming that the reader accepts the First Vision as a historical event. If the First Vision is *not* true, then Mormonism *cannot* be true. Consider these articles that details problems with the First Vision:

- Do the First Vision Accounts Coincide?
- The First Vision Account: Response to the LDS.org Essay
- First Vision: Fact or Fiction?
- Which First Vision Account Should we Believe?
- The First Vision's Slow Entrance

it appears that the first great responsibility placed upon the restored Church was to carry the gospel to the world—to all our Father's children.

In Mormonism, "all our Father's children" is a direct reference to Preexistence/Premortality. If this concept is not true, then humanity is not related. And this would mean that exaltation, or godhood, is also a pipe dream.

It has truly been a great drama of transcendent importance—a drama of sacrifice, joy, hardship, courage, and above all, love of fellowmen. Nowhere upon the face of the earth will you find a human drama to equal it. Yes, it has cost blood, sweat, and tears to carry forth this labor of love. And why have we done it? Because the God of heaven has commanded it; because he loves his children, and it is his will that the teeming millions of the earth shall have opportunity to hear and, of their own free will, accept and live the glorious saving and exalting principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

According to Mormonism, those who don't hear the LDS gospel in this life will have full opportunity in the next. According to D&C 137:7, "Thus came the voice of the Lord unto me, saying: All who have died without a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God." If this is the case, then wouldn't it be more loving *not* to tell others about the LDS gospel?

This is especially true since the commands of Mormonism are impossible to keep. With my tongue firmly in cheek, I would request that only those Mormons who are living according to the teachings of Mormonism and doing all they can do be allowed to tell others about Mormonism. Everyone else ought to keep this gospel to themselves. In this way, more people will not have the opportunity to hear but have full ability to progress in the next life. As they say, ignorance is bliss.

It is my conviction that the world needs, as it needs no other thing, the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the people of the world want what the gospel will give, but they do not realize it. They want the anchor which the gospel provides, which gives them the answers to the problems that face them; that brings them a feeling of security and a feeling of inner peace. The gospel is the only answer to the problems of the world, my brethren and sisters.

I agree. However, the world needs to hear about the true *gospel* of Jesus Christ, not a counterfeit gospel as advertised by the Mormon Church. I know that what I just wrote in the previous sentence sounds a bit confrontational, but the point is this: The Mormon believes he has the true gospel, as does the Christian. Both cannot be correct, however. Hence, which gospel is true? That is what needs to be answered.

Only the gospel will save the world from the calamity of its own self-destruction. Only the gospel will unite men of all races and nationalities in peace. Only the gospel will bring joy, happiness, and salvation to the human family.

Saying that Mormonism's gospel is capable of bringing "joy, happiness, and salvation" to humanity is like saying that Pepsi-Cola can fix the hunger problems of the world or that Nike can help the blind receive sight. The product cannot deliver what is promised. It's nothing more than false advertising.

The world is hungry for true religion, and we have it.

Someone who is "hungry for true religion" will do well to stay away from Mormonism, as it has no "truth" to offer.

This is the glorious message we desire to share with the world, that through God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God has been restored. It is the greatest message since the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

If the First Vision is true, then Christianity needed a restoration. If it's not true, then no restoration is needed. The evidence indicates there was no such event. Therefore, Mormonism is not the "greatest message since the resurrection of Jesus Christ." No, the resurrection shines brightly while the First Vision—and the very need for the Mormon Church—pales in comparison.

We accept humbly, gratefully, this major responsibility placed upon the Church. We are happy to be engaged in a partnership with our Heavenly Father in the great work of the salvation and exaltation of his children. Willingly we give of our time and the means with which he may bless us to the establishment of his kingdom in the earth. This we know is our first duty and our great opportunity. This spirit has characterized the missionary work of the Church of Jesus Christ in all ages. It has been an outstanding mark of the ushering in of the dispensation of the fulness of times—our time. Wherever faithful Latter-day Saints are to be found, this spirit of unselfish sacrifice for the greatest cause in all the earth exists. We have a great mission. We must be prepared, both young and old. We must stand as a leaven among the nations, true to the principles of righteousness.

There is no argument that Mormons sacrifice dearly for their faith. Faithful Mormons spend many, many hours dedicated to their faith. However, could their dedication come at a cost greater than what they could ever imagine, the salvation of their souls? If so, then their sacrifice comes with great consequences and should not be something anyone exults in.

We hope that every young man has plans to be a messenger for the Lord.

How do you build in boys a great desire to serve? You do not wait … to help them decide to serve a mission. You help them decide to go when they are nine, ten, or eleven! The home is the seedbed for the preparation of young men. And every young man should be prepared in his home to serve.

Early preparation consists of teaching a young boy how to pray, reading him stories from the Book of Mormon and other scriptures, having home evenings and giving him a portion of the

lesson [to teach], teaching him principles of moral cleanliness, starting a savings account for his future mission, teaching him how to work, and providing opportunities to serve others.

We want young men entering the mission field who can enter the mission field "on the run," who have the faith born of personal righteousness and clean living that they can have a great and productive mission.

The Lord wants every young man to serve a full-time mission. … A young man can do nothing more important. School can wait. Scholarships can be deferred. Occupational goals can be postponed. Yes, even temple marriage should wait until after a young man has served an honorable full-time mission for the Lord.

… Young women … may also have the opportunity to serve a full-time mission. I am grateful my own eternal companion served a mission in Hawaii before we were married in the Salt Lake Temple, and I am pleased that I have had three granddaughters serve full-time missions. Some of our finest missionaries are young sisters.

The age for LDS missionaries entering the field went down a few years ago, from 19 for boys to 18 and from 21 for females to 19. Based on this administrative change, many more missionaries have entered the field. Where there were typically fewer than 60,000 missionaries, today there are more than 80,000. Much of the growth comes because the females are joining at greater numbers than ever before. One of the drawbacks is that missionaries are younger than ever and even more inexperienced. Some are not very mature. Only time will tell, but we wonder if this new policy will result in more returning missionaries questioning their faith when they return.

Member missionaries

We must emphasize the need for more member-missionary work. Experience has proven this is the most fruitful missionary work. Member-missionary work is one of the great keys to the individual growth of our members. It is my conviction that member-missionary work will raise the spirituality in any ward where applied.

I find it interesting how Benson tells the general membership that missionary work is their responsibility, yet I have never (to my recollection) been evangelized by laymembers who initialized an evangelism encounter with me. When the topic does come up, Mormons typically want to evangelize me by having missionaries come to my home. I don't consider this personal evangelism.

"The Lord expects us to be missionaries."

How long has it been since you have invited a neighbor to sacrament meeting or to a stake conference, to come into your home for a home evening? How long has it been since you had a real gospel conversation? These are choice experiences.

A few years ago I was invited to a special Christmas program combining the choirs of a local Protestant church and Mormon ward. Although I disagree with mixing congregations of two different faiths, I attended because of the invitation and out of curiosity to see what this would look like. However, as mentioned earlier, the times that my Latter-day Saint acquaintances have initialized sharing their faith with me is…I can't recall even one occurrence.

The Book of Mormon is the great standard we are to use in our missionary work.

The Book of Mormon is for both member and nonmember. Combined with the Spirit of the Lord, the Book of Mormon is the greatest tool which God has given us to convert the world. If we are to have the harvest of souls, we must use the instrument which God has designed for the task—the Book of Mormon.

And reading the Book of Mormon is one of the greatest persuaders to get us on missions. We need more missionaries. But we also need better-prepared missionaries coming out of the wards and branches and homes where they know and love the Book of Mormon. We need missionaries who have a burning testimony of its divinity, and who by the Spirit can challenge their investigators to read and ponder its pages, knowing with complete assurance that the Lord will manifest the truth of it to them by the power of the Holy Ghost. We need missionaries to match our message.

The Book of Mormon is the great standard we are to use in our missionary work. It shows that Joseph Smith was a prophet. It contains the words of Christ, and its great mission is to bring men to Christ. All other things are secondary. The golden question of the Book of Mormon is "Do you want to learn more of Christ?" The Book of Mormon is the great finder of the golden contact. It does not contain things which are "pleasing unto the world," and so the worldly are not interested in it. It is a great sieve. (See 1 Nephi 6:5.)

There is a difference between a convert who is built on the rock of Christ through the Book of Mormon and stays hold of the iron rod, and one who is not.

We must not forget that the Lord Himself provided the Book of Mormon as His chief witness. The Book of Mormon is still our most powerful missionary tool. Let us use it.

Just like the First Vision account, the Book of Mormon story is suspicious. Did it really take place? The outside evidence indicates that the Book of Mormon is fiction, not history. If it didn't take place, then basing a gospel on this work is very precarious. Instead of basing truth on a book

with no semblance of credibility, why not focus on God's Word and the Bible, which is not only historical but also true. Consider the many problems with the Book of Mormon story here.

To be successful in missionary work, we must obtain the Spirit, acquire humility, love the people, and work diligently.

Missionaries sometimes ask, "How can I be successful? How does one become effective in missionary work?" Here are four proven keys to successful missionary work for both missionaries and members alike.

First, strive to obtain the Spirit.

Notice the word "strive." It's something that characterizes Mormonism. A person is required to reach God according to this philosophy. Christianity, on the other hand, says that God reaches out to His people.

To be successful, we must have the Spirit of the Lord. We have been taught that the Spirit will not dwell in unclean tabernacles. Therefore, one of our first priorities is to make sure our own personal lives are in order. The Lord declared, "Be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord." (Doctrine and Covenants 38:42.)

How many sins make a person unclean? Twenty? Five? Even one? If it's just one sin that makes a person unclean, then which Mormon qualifies to have the Spirit of the Lord?

The Savior has given us His law about teaching His gospel: "The Spirit shall be given unto you by the prayer of faith; and if ye receive not the Spirit ye shall not teach." (Doctrine and Covenants 42:14.)

So should we assume that any LDS teacher of the gospel is without sin?

Second, acquire humility.

The Lord has said that no one can assist with this work unless he is humble and full of love. (See Doctrine and Covenants 12:8.) But humility does not mean weakness. It does not mean timidity; it does not mean fear. [We] can be humble and also fearless. [We] can be humble and also courageous. Humility is the recognition of our dependence upon a higher power, a constant need for the Lord's support in His work.

Yet Mormonism breeds pride. Just the fact that a person obtains a temple recommend by claiming to be "worthy" is boasting of what that individual has done. For more, check out this article.

We cannot do this work alone.

Take out the word "alone" and the Christian would agree. Salvation is not a cooperative effort. Rather, it's all about Jesus forgiving all of a person's sins by doing 100% of the word. As sinful humans, we have nothing to offer. (Is. 64:6; Rom. 3:10).

This is His work. This is His gospel. We must have His help. Plead for it, live for it, pour out your soul to the Lord to receive it.

Please see how big of a difference this really is. In Mormonism, people are told they need God's "help." In Christianity, however, it's all about what God has done. He is the one who performs radical surgery on the unconscious patient. Upon waking, the person realizes that the healing came because of the surgeon and not because of anything he/she had done.

Third, love the people.

We must develop a love for people. Our hearts must go out to them in the pure love of the gospel, in a desire to lift them, to build them up, to point them to a higher, finer life and eventually to exaltation in the celestial kingdom of God. We emphasize the fine qualities of the people with whom we associate, and love them as children of God whom the Lord loves. …

We will never be effective until we learn to have sympathy for all our Father's children—until we learn to love them. People can feel when love is extended to them. Many yearn for it. When we sympathize with their feelings, they in turn will reciprocate good will to us. We will have made a friend.

We … have a great obligation to love our neighbors. It is the second of the two great commandments. Many of our neighbors are not yet members of the Church. We must be good neighbors. We must love all our Father's children and associate with them.

How I pray that we will be filled with the love of God for our fellowman!

I too want my neighbors to know about the hope I have found in Jesus. Whether it's through friendship evangelism or stranger evangelism, we are commanded to share the truth. Peter told his readers that we need to do this with gentleness and respect (1 Pet. 3:15-16). May the Latter-day Saint understand that in the same way they are commanded to love folks like me, Christians are commanded to share truth with them. Let's have a meeting of the minds and do what Isaiah 1:18 says: "Come now, and let us reason together."

Fourth, work diligently.

If we want to keep the Spirit, we must work.

In Mormonism, the Spirit only stays with those who are obedient. It's sort of like plucking the pedals of a daisy: He loves me, He loves me not. Christians, however, are sealed with the Spirit. Ephesians 1:13 says,

> And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.

In fact, 2 Corinthians 1:22 states,

> set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

Notice how the Spirit is a deposit offering a guarantee for what is to come. When He resides in a believer's life, He is not going to leave.

There is no greater exhilaration or satisfaction than to know, after a hard day of work, that we have done our best.

Unfortunately, doing our *best* is not good enough. Spencer W. Kimball stated,

> To "try" is weak. To "do the best I can" is not strong. We must always do better than we can. (*The Miracle of Forgiveness*, p. 165)

How is it possible to "always do better than we can"? If I can only do so much, how can I do better than this?

One of the greatest secrets of missionary work is work. If a missionary works, he will get the Spirit; if he gets the Spirit, he will teach by the Spirit; if he teaches by the Spirit, he will touch the hearts of the people, and he will be happy. … Work, work, work—there is no satisfactory substitute, especially in missionary work.

In the same book quoted above, Spencer W. Kimball stated,

> This progress toward eternal life is a matter of achieving perfection. Living all the commandments guarantees total forgiveness of sins and assures one of exaltation through that perfection which comes by complying with the formula the Lord gave us. In his Sermon on the Mount he made the command to all men: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." (Matt. 5:48.) Being perfect means to triumph over sin. This is a mandate from the Lord. He is just and wise and kind. He would never require anything from his children which was not for their benefit and which was not

> attainable. Perfection therefore is an achievable goal (*The Miracle of Forgiveness*, pp. 208-209).

Work, work, work. A person can "work" for an entire lifetime but never be able to swim to Hawaii. Despite all the training and dedication, if something is impossible, it can't be earned. Rather, the only way to get to Hawaii will either be carried by plane or ship. Swimming is not an option. And nobody can live all the commandments, no matter how hard they try.

I know that God lives. This is His work. He has again spoken from the heavens with a message for the entire world; not for a handful of Latter-day Saints only, but for all our brothers and sisters, both in and out of the Church. May God give us strength to carry that message to the world, to live the Gospel, to maintain the standards of the Church, that we may be entitled to the promised blessings.

Finally, this chapter ends by saying how maintaining the "standards of the Church" is what allows a person to "be entitled to the promised blessings." Yet who can do this? Kimball says it would take a "superman":

> In the context of the spirit of forgiveness, one good brother asked me, "Yes, that is what ought to be done, but how do you do it? Doesn't that take a superman?" "Yes," I said, "but we are commanded to be supermen. Said the Lord, 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.' (Matt. 5:48.) We are gods in embryo, and the Lord demands perfection of us" (*The Miracle of Forgiveness*, p. 286).

Latter-day Saint, are you the "superman" to whom your president refers? Or are you just weary? Salvation is not something you earn or even cooperate with God in order to attain. Rather, it's available…for the asking. Consider reading the following articles:

- How can a person get into heaven?
- Would you be willing to take the Romans Challenge? Espanol
- Other articles on salvation

Chapter 23: “Strengthen Thy Stakes”

As members of the Church, we gather in the stakes of Zion.

Nonmembers sometimes inquire, “What is a stake?” Members likewise inquire, “What is the significance of a stake? What does it mean to us as members?”

To nonmembers, a stake is similar to a diocese in other churches. A stake is a geographical area comprising a number of wards (local congregations) and presided over by a presidency.

To members, the term stake is a symbolic expression. Picture in your mind a great tent held up by cords extended to many stakes that are firmly secured in the ground. The prophets likened latter-day Zion to a great tent encompassing the earth [see Isaiah 54:2; 3 Nephi 22:2]. That tent was supported by cords fastened to stakes. Those stakes, of course, are various geographical organizations spread out over the earth. Presently Israel is being gathered to the various stakes of Zion.

I must admit, this is the first time I can remember where an entire chapter in a *Teachings of Presidents of the Church* was dedicated to the topic of the “stake.” Yes, a number of chapters in previous editions have been dedicated to Joseph Smith, baptism, sabbath-keeping, and a variety of other teachings and issues. This chapter from Benson is certainly unique from any other book. As this introductory paragraph has explained, a stake in Mormonism is made up of different wards in a geographical region. In the last sentence of this paragraph, Benson intimates that a stake is similar to how the ancient nation of Israel was organized.

A stake has at least four purposes:

1. Each stake, presided over by three high priests, and supported by twelve men known as a high council, becomes a miniature church to the Saints in a specific geographic area. The purpose is to unify and perfect the members who live in those boundaries by extending to them the Church programs, ordinances, and gospel instruction.
2. Members of stakes are to be models or standards of righteousness.
3. Stakes are to be a defense. The members do this as they unify under their local priesthood officers and consecrate themselves to do their duty and keep their covenants. Those covenants, if kept, become a protection from error, evil, or calamity.

Consider what LDS leaders have taught about making and then keeping the covenants made at baptism, in the temple, and weekly at the sacrament. For the latter, tenth President Joseph Fielding Smith said,

> I wish we could get the members of the Church to understand more clearly the covenants they make when they partake of the sacrament at our sacrament meetings (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Fielding Smith*, 2013, p. 100)

Russell M. Nelson, who now is the most senior apostle, said keeping the covenants is most important:

> Obedience to the sacred covenants made in temples qualifies us for eternal life—the greatest gift of God to man ("Prepare for the Blessings of the Temple," *Ensign* Special Issue Temples, October 2010, p. 42).

President Spencer W. Kimball said it takes no effort to break a covenant:

> One breaks the priesthood covenant by transgressing commandments–but also by leaving undone his duties. Accordingly, to break this covenant one needs only to do nothing (*The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, p. 497).

Elsewhere, President Ezra Taft Benson taught,

> We go to our chapels each week to worship the Lord and renew our covenants by partaking of the sacrament. We thereby promise to take His name upon us, to always remember Him, and keep all His commandments. Our agreement to keep all the commandments is our covenant with God. Only as we do this may we deserve His blessings and merit His mercy (*The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson*, p. 442).

Apostle Robert D. Hales says this promise made by the individual member initially takes place at baptism and continues every following Sunday at the sacrament service:

> When we are baptized, we "take upon [us] the name of Christ" and enter "into the covenant with God that [we will] be obedient unto the end of [our] lives." Each Sunday we renew that baptismal covenant by partaking of the sacrament and witnessing that we are willing to keep the commandments ("If You Love Me, Keep My Commandments," *Ensign* (Conference Edition), May 2014, p. 35).

Based on the teachings of Mormonism's general authorities, the only way to "merit" God's mercy is "keep all the commandments." Someone may say, "Oh, is that all?" (Sarcasm intended.) Indeed, keeping all of God's commandments is an impossible task. At this point, another may quip, "That's what repentance is for!" Yet true repentance only comes when the person is no longer repeating the same sins again. D&C 58:42-43 states,

> Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more. By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins—behold, he will confess them and forsake them.

D&C 82:7 says,

> And now, verily I say unto you, I, the Lord, will not lay any sin to your charge; go your ways and sin no more; but unto that soul who sinneth shall the former sins return, saith the Lord your God.

These verses support Spencer W. Kimball's analysis of the issue:

> The forsaking of sin must be a permanent one. True repentance does not permit making the same mistake again…The Lord said: "Go your ways and sin no more; but unto that soul who sinneth shall the former sins return." (D&C 82:7)" (*Repentance Brings Forgiveness*, an unnumbered tract).
>
> Repentance is for every soul who has not yet reached perfection (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball*, 2006, p. 37).

In his preface to modern revelation, the Lord outlined what is one of the most difficult requirements in true repentance. For some it is the hardest part of repentance, because it puts one on guard for the remainder of his life. The Lord says: "… I the Lord cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance; Nevertheless, he that repents and does the *commandments of the Lord* shall be forgiven." (D&C 1:31–32. Italics added.) This scripture is most precise. First, one repents. Having gained that ground he then must live the commandments of the Lord to retain his vantage point. This is necessary to secure complete forgiveness" (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball*, 2006, p. 43. Ellipsis and italics in original).

George Q. Cannon a member of the First Presidency, said,

> When I say repent, I mean a complete forsaking of sin, and turning from it truly and sincerely; in no other way can mankind escape the judgments and calamities threatened, and of which they are warned (July 14, 1872, *Journal of Discourses* 15:113).

Hugh G. Brown explained,

> When we speak of the continual need of repentance, let it not be understood that we refer to a cycle of sinning and repenting and sinning again. That is not complete repentance. We must see the right and follow it, recognize the wrong and forsake it with a "Godly sorrow" if we would obtain the blessings of complete repentance (Cited in *Young Women Manual 1*, Lesson 22: Repentance (2002), p. 99).

Church manuals also agree with these procedures:

> 8. He removes our sins if we keep his commandments (*Uniform System for Teaching Investigators*, 1961, p. 55).
>
> 10. We repent by no longer sinning (*Uniform System for Teaching Investigators*, 1961, p. 55).

The manuals state it like Mormonism says it is:

> **Doctrine and Covenants 82:7. We are commanded to forsake sin. If we sin again after repenting, our former sins return. (5–10 minutes)** Bring several rocks to class that are all labeled with the same sin (for example, breaking the Word of Wisdom). Tell students a story about an imaginary person who commits this sin. Invent details to embellish your story. Each time the imaginary person commits the sin, pick up a rock, until you are holding several of them. Set all the rocks you are holding aside and ask: • What might setting the rocks aside represent? (Repentance.) • What happens to our sins when we repent? (The Lord forgives them.) Read Doctrine and Covenants 82:7 and look for what happens when we sin again. Ask: • How many rocks would a person need to pick up if he sins after repenting? (All that you were previously holding plus a new one.) • Why do you think our former sins return? • What does that teach you about the importance of forsaking sin? • How can knowing this doctrine help you avoid sin? (*Doctrine and Covenants and Church History Seminary Teacher Resource Manual*, 2001, p. 134. Bold in original).
>
> **D&C 58:42–43. The Lord Promises Complete Forgiveness to Those Who Truly Repent.** The Lord forgives those who truly repent of their sins. This blessing comes through the Atonement of Christ, who 'suffered … for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent' (D&C 19:16). The Lord promises that He will no more remember the sins of those who repent (see Ezekiel 18:21– 22). Repentance, however, requires that we forsake and turn completely from our sins and confess them (*Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual Religion 324)*

However, such concepts are antithetical to everything the Bible and Gospel of Grace stands for. According to the Bible, forgiveness for sins is available as a free gift—besides belief, there is nothing a person must do. So we can either choose the gospel according to Mormonism or we can choose the gospel according to historical Christianity. For the Mormon presentation, let's hear what Apostle David Bednar has to say:

> Ordinances and covenants are the building blocks we use to construct our lives upon the foundation of Christ and His Atonement. We are connected securely to and with the

> Savior as we worthily receive ordinances and enter into covenants, faithfully remember and honor those sacred commitments, and do our best to live in accordance with the obligations we have accepted. And that bond is the source of spiritual strength and stability in all of the seasons of our lives. We can be blessed to hush our fears as we firmly establish our desires and deeds upon the sure foundation of the Savior through ordinances and covenants ("Therefore They Hushed Their Fears," *Ensign*, May 2015 (Conference Edition), p. 48).

According to the version of Mormonism as described by Bednar, "we are connected securely to and with the Savior" by receiving ordinances and entering into covenants.

Let's face it, it's impossible to keep these covenants as proposed by Mormonism. This doesn't mean the commandments are unnecessary or unhelpful. According to Romans 3:20, the law informs us that we are inadequate to merit God's mercy. It says, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin." Verses 21-31 to on to explain the biblical way of obtaining forgiveness of sins:

> [21] But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. [22] This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, [23] for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, [24] and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. [25] God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— [26] he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. [27] Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. [28] For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. [29] Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too,[30] since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. [31] Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.

There is no clearer explanation of the biblical view of obtaining God's righteousness than the words from this passage. Only when we understand that true salvation is not somehow obtained by being good enough do we grasp the essence of the Gospel of Grace. Ephesians 2:8-9 say,

> For it is by grace you have been saved,through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.

Other verses reiterate that it is by faith, not by works, that allows a person to know God:

> Acts 4:12: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."
>
> Acts 16:31: "They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household."
>
> Romans 10:9-10: "If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved."

It is an assurance of salvation that God intends for each believer to have. As 1 John 5:13 states,

> I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

If you're a Latter-day Saint, don't you realize the impossibility of keeping the covenants you make on a weekly basis? If you do understand this, then why do you continue to make promises that you know, deep down inside, you will never be able to keep?

We build temples only where we have stakes. The blessings and ordinances of the temple prepare one for exaltation. Of course, it is not possible for every stake to have a temple, but we are presently witnessing some remarkable, yes, miraculous developments, in the building of temples in different parts of the world. Such a program permits members of the Church to receive the full blessings of the Lord.

There are several problems with the line of reasoning provided by Benson:

- In biblical times, the temple was a place dedicated to the slaughter of animal sacrifices. Each animal was considered to be a temporary sin-covering for the person making the sacrifice.
- There was only one temple, which was in Jerusalem. There were no exceptions. All other temples were considered illegitimate. Hence, when Mormons build "temples" (plural), one has to ask why multiple buildings are used? If it's for the convenience of the members, this is not a valid reason.
- Those priests who presided over the temple were those hailing from the tribe of Levi. Nobody else was allowed to provide service.

Bear with me, but allow me to quote the second half of Hebrews chapter 9 to explain how Jesus—who earlier in the book is called a priest after the order of Melchizedek—became the enforcer of the new covenant through His death on the cross:

> **11** But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he
> went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands,
> that is to say, is not a part of this creation. **12** He did not enter by means of the blood of
> goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus
> obtaining eternal redemption.**13** The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer
> sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly
> clean.**14** How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit
> offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death
> so that we may serve the living God!
>
> **15** For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may
> receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them
> free from the sins committed under the first covenant. **16** In the case of a will, it is
> necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, **17** because a will is in force only
> when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living. **18** This
> is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood. **19** When Moses had
> proclaimed every command of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves,
> together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all
> the people. **20** He said, "This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you
> to keep." **21** In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and
> everything used in its ceremonies. **22** In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be
> cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.
>
> **23** It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these
> sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. **24** For
> Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true
> one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. **25** Nor did he enter
> heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy
> Place every year with blood that is not his own. **26** Otherwise Christ would have had to
> suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the
> culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. **27** Just as people
> are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, **28** so Christ was sacrificed once
> to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to
> bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

As for me, I'd much rather rest my hope in Jesus and in His accomplishments than whatever I am capable of doing–usually, it's fouling things up rather than making things better. As much as I want to do the right thing, I usually feel like Paul in Romans 5:

> [8] But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment,produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead.[9] Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. [10] I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. [11] For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. [12] So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good. [13] Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! Nevertheless, in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it used what is good to bring about my death, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful. [14] We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.
>
> [15] I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. [16] And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good.[17] As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. [18] For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. [19] For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.[20] Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. [21] So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. [22] For in my inner being I delight in God's law; [23] but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. [24] What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? [25] Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

These verses are in stark contrast to the gospel as offered by the Mormon Church.

In His preface to His revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord warned: "The day speedily cometh; the hour is not yet, but is nigh at hand, when peace shall be taken from the earth, and the devil shall have power over his own dominion" [Doctrine and Covenants 1:35].

Only in Jesus can there be hope and a peace that, as Philippians 4:7 puts it, passes all understanding.

Today … we see the fulfillment of this prediction where Satan, in undiminished fury, is displaying power over "his own dominion"—the earth. Never has his influence been so great, and only those who have taken the Holy Spirit as their guide—and followed counsel from priesthood leaders—will be spared from the havoc of his evil influence.

I would agree that only those who have the Holy Spirit can be protected from Satan. The question is, how can a Mormon know if he or she has the Holy Spirit? It's only when he or she is keeping all the covenants by obeying all the commandments.

Gathering with fellow Saints, we see that a stake can "be for a defense, and for a refuge from the storm" (D&C 115:6).

Fellowship with other believers is very important for the Christian. Of this there is no doubt. But the ultimate refuge for a Christian believer is God Himself. Both God (Ps. 57:1b) and Jesus (Matt. 23:37) are referred to "mother hens." We can find refuge with God whenever we go through the storms offered by life.

Through revelation we know that there will be perils, calamities, and persecution in the latter days, but through righteousness the Saints may be spared. The promise of the Lord in the Book of Mormon is sure: "He will preserve the righteous by his power." (1 Nephi 22:17.)

The question is, can a Latter-day Saint be good enough in order to be considered "righteous"? I conclude this article with this wonderful hymn by Edward Mote:

1. My hope is built on nothing less

   Than Jesus' blood and righteousness;

   I dare not trust the sweetest frame,

   But wholly lean on Jesus' name.
   - Refrain:

     On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;

     All other ground is sinking sand,

     All other ground is sinking sand.
2. When darkness veils His lovely face,

   I rest on His unchanging grace;

   In every high and stormy gale,

   My anchor holds within the veil.

3. His oath, His covenant, His blood

   Support me in the whelming flood;

   When all around my soul gives way,

   He then is all my hope and stay.
4. When He shall come with trumpet sound,

   Oh, may I then in Him be found;

   Dressed in His righteousness alone,

   Faultless to stand before the throne.

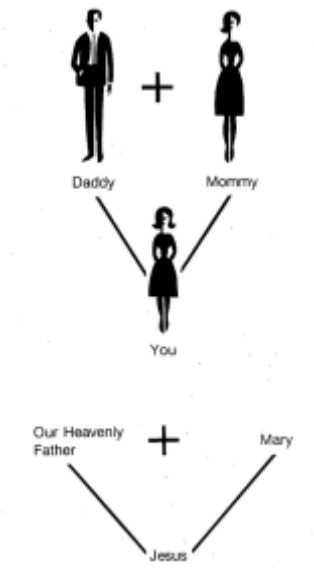
For a YouTube offering a beautiful modern-day rendition of this hymn click here. While you listen to this, ask yourself: Am I willing to give up and rest on His unchanging grace? Click 10 reasons why a person ought to consider becoming a Christian

Chapter 24: A Christ-Centered Life

The example and teachings of Jesus Christ provide the great standard for all mankind. Two thousand years ago a perfect man walked the earth: Jesus the Christ. He was the son of a heavenly father and an earthly mother.

Let's stop here for just a moment. Many would skip right over the introductory two sentences without a second thought. Yet what exactly does Benson mean when he says that Jesus "was the son of a heavenly father and an earthly mother"? Traditional Mormonism teaches in a "Virgin Birth" while providing a description far removed from that held by Christians throughout the centuries. An instructor's guide to a church manual explains how Mormonism disagrees with the traditional doctrine:

> The teacher might wish to point out that many people in the Christian world want to believe in Jesus, but only as a great human being, only as a great man. They feel uncomfortable about the concept of the miraculous, virgin birth. Yet if this is denied, all of the Atonement must be rejected as well. It was the inheritance that came from a mortal mother and a divine Father that made the Atonement possible. (*The Life and Teachings of Jesus and His Apostles Instructor's Manual: Religion 211-212*, p. 14)



What exactly does the leadership mean when it refers to a "mortal mother and a divine Father"? Let's allow the LDS leaders and church resources to speak for themselves:

- "Now, we are told in scriptures that Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God in the flesh. Well, now for the benefit of the older ones, how are children begotten? I answer just as Jesus Christ was begotten of his father. . . . Jesus is the only person who had our

Heavenly Father as the father of his body" (*Family Home Evening Manual*, pp. 125-126). *(Note: This publication was made to help Mormon parents communicate with their children on spiritual topics like this. The illustration to the rigth was included on these pages to help explain the doctrine. It's pretty clear what the church leaders wanted their people to believe about the "Virgin Birth.")*

- "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints proclaims that Jesus Christ is the Son of God in the most literal sense. The body in which He performed His mission in the flesh was sired by that same Holy Being we worship as God, our Eternal Father. Jesus was not the son of Joseph, nor was He begotten by the Holy Ghost. He is the Son of the Eternal Father!"(Ezra Taft Benson, *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson*, p. 7. This was quoted in the *Ensign* (April 1997), p. 15).
- "To condescend is literally to go down among. The condescension of God lies in the fact that he, an exalted Being, steps down from his eternal throne to become the Father of a mortal Son, a Son born 'after the manner of the flesh'"(*Book of Mormon Seminary Student Study Guide*, p. 22).
- "He is the Son of God, literally, actually, as men are the sons of mortal parents" ("What the Mormons Think of Christ," a pamphlet published by the LDS Church, p. 44).
- "Thus, God the Father became the literal father of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only person on earth to be born of a mortal mother and an immortal father"(*Gospel Principles*, p. 53).
- "Our Savior, Jesus Christ, is called the Only Begotten Son because He is the only person on earth to be born of a mortal mother and an immortal Father. . . . Modern prophets have testified: [Jesus Christ] was . . . the Only Begotten Son in the flesh, the Redeemer of the world"("The Divine Mission of Jesus Christ: The Only Begotten Son," *Ensign* (December 2013), p. 7).

Since Mormonism teaches that Mary did not have sexual relations with a *mortal* man but instead was impregnated by an *immortal* man (Elohim), many Latter-day Saints have no qualms with this unique and nonhistorical teaching. BYU professor Charles Harrell describes the difficulties with this position when he writes:

Of course, for Latter-day Saints who hold the belief that Christ was literally conceived by God the Father, the idea of a virgin birth becomes a bit problematic as it would presumably change Mary's status as a virgin. Bruce R. McConkie gives his resolution to this conundrum by redefining "virgin" to mean a woman who has not known a *mortal* man: "She conceived and brought forth her Firstborn Son while yet a virgin because the Father of that child was an immortal personage"(*"This is My Doctrine,"* p. 167).

When one considers how Mormonism teaches that every human born on earth is a literal child of God, the above quotes become even more disconcerting. Mormon leaders have maintained that all humans, Mary included, are literally God's spirit children, born in the preexistence via a sexual relationship between Heavenly Father and one of his goddess wives. If LDS leaders are

telling the truth when they say that God physically impregnated Mary, then we have no other recourse than to assume that the Jesus of Mormonism was created through an incestuous relationship. Such an interpretation is anathema to the biblical position. For more on this topic, click here.

He is the God of this world, under the Father. He taught men truth, that they might be free. His example and precepts provide the great standard, the only sure way, for all mankind.

No other single influence has had so great an impact on this earth as the life of Jesus the Christ. We cannot conceive of our lives without his teachings. Without him we would be lost in a mirage of beliefs and worships, born in fear and darkness where the sensual and materialistic hold sway. We are far short of the goal he set for us, but we must never lose sight of it; nor must we forget that our great climb toward the light, toward perfection, would not be possible except for his teachings, his life, his death, and his resurrection.

Notice how Benson says that "our great climb toward the light, toward perfection" would be impossible except with the help of Jesus. According to Mormonism, Jesus paved the way for humankind to reach for perfection.

Yet Mormon leaders have taught that Jesus had to attain his own perfection and did not have the attributes of deity when he came to this earth. Jay E. Jensen, a member of the Presidency of the Seventy, explained, "When the Lord came to earth, He had a veil of forgetfulness placed over His mind, as we do, but He, like us, progressed from grace to grace" (*Ensign* (January 2011), p. 42). One resource traces the teaching back to Mormonism's founder Joseph Smith:

> As Joseph Smith taught, Jesus was born with a veil of forgetfulness common to all who are born to earth, but even as a child he had all the intelligence necessary to enable him to govern the kingdom of the Jews (see source under Basic Library), because he overcame the veil and came into communication with his Heavenly Father (*The Life and Teachings of Jesus and His Apostles Instructor's Manual*, p. 13).

He even needed to be obedient to attain a status as "god." Seventy Milton R. Hunter said it was "through consistent effort and continuous obedience to all the Gospel truths and universal laws" that allowed for this. That effort, Hunter continued, included Jesus's own baptism:

> Although John recognized Jesus as a perfect man, the Master made it clear that it was absolutely necessary for even the Son of God to be baptized. He—like the least of us—must obey every law of the Gospel if He was to receive all the blessings predicated on obedience. (*The Gospel Through the Ages*, p. 200).

This idea that Jesus was under obligation of the law has been taught by a number of leaders. Sixth President Joseph F. Smith said,

> "Even Christ himself was not perfect at first; he received not a fullness at first, but he received grace for grace, and he continued to receive more and more until he received a fulness." (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith*, p. 153).

Apostle Bruce R. McConkie claimed, "Jesus kept the commandments of his Father and thereby worked out his own salvation, and also set an example as to the way and the means whereby all men may be saved" (*The Mortal Messiah* 4:434). McConkie's use of Philippians 2:12 ("work out your salvation") misses the meaning of the passage. Paul does not use this expression to mean "work for your salvation" as so many Mormons will insist. Rather, as the words literally read, it means that believers "should 'conduct' themselves in a manner worthy of their right standing before God at the day of Christ" (*The NIV Application Commentary: Philippians*, p. 138).

Apostle Russell M. Nelson said Jesus achieved His perfection only after His resurrection:

> That Jesus attained perfection following his resurrection is confirmed in the Book of Mormon. It records the visit of the resurrected Lord to the people of ancient America. There he repeated the important injunction previously cited, but with one very significant addition. He said, "I would that ye should be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect" (3 Nephi 12:48). This time he listed himself along with his Father as a perfected personage. Previously, he had not (See Matt. 5:48) (*Ensign* (November 1995), p. 87).

According to this, there was a time when Jesus had not "attained perfection." Such a comment fails to take into account that only sinners need to be saved in the first place. To say Christ had to do anything to gain His own salvation should rightfully be considered blasphemous by anyone who holds the Bible dear. Think about it. If Jesus had to attain His own perfection, then what exactly caused Him to need to become perfect? It can't be sin because Jesus is sinless. The very idea proposed by the President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles saying how Jesus needed to progress ought to be alarming to anyone who reads the Bible and understands that Jesus is God.

In essence, Mormonism diminishes the very person of Jesus because it is absurd to think that the Savior somehow needed to have continual "obedience to gospel laws." We are speaking, after all, about the Creator of the universe. As one creed puts it, he is "very God of very God." By nature, Jesus is holy and perfect. He did take the form of a man. This is not to say that at any time His Godhood was diminished in any degree after His physical appearance on earth (His incarnation). Jesus was, and is, both divine and human: 100 percent God and 100 percent man. He was conceived through the agency of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:18–25; Luke 1:35);

He lived a sinless life while subjected to human temptations (John 5:19; Heb. 2:18; 4:15); He died a real death and rose again bodily from the dead to conquer sin (Rom. 5:6–10; 1 Cor. 15:3–4); He will return to judge all humanity (John 5:22); He sent the Holy Spirit to empower the believers (John 14–16; Acts 1:8); and He can be prayed to (Acts 7:59).28 Finally, He is deserving to receive honor, love, faith, and worship as the Father (Matt. 10:37; John 5:23; 14:1; Heb. 1:6). At the same time, He shares attributes with the Father because Jesus is also God.

We come unto Christ as we look unto Him in every thought and emulate His attributes. In Book of Mormon language, we need to "believe in Christ and deny him not." (2 Ne. 25:28.) We need to trust in Christ and not in the arm of flesh. (See 2 Ne. 4:34.) We need to "come unto Christ, and be perfected in him." (Moro. 10:32.) We need to come "with a broken heart and a contrite spirit" (3 Ne. 12:19), hungering and thirsting after righteousness (see 3 Ne. 12:6). We need to come "feasting upon the word of Christ" (2 Ne. 31:20), as we receive it through His scriptures, His anointed, and His Holy Spirit. In short, we need to follow "the example of the Son of the living God" (2 Ne. 31:16).

Allow me to make a comment on one of the verses used here, which will be referenced at the end of this particular chapter. Moroni 10:32 says, in full:

> Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ; and if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in nowise deny the power of God.

A church manual gives an explanation of the verse:

> According to this verse, what must we do to "come unto Christ, and be perfected in him?" ("Deny ourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all [our] might, mind and strength.") Explain that "deny yourselves of all ungodliness" means "give up your sins." We must strive to give up our sins and demonstrate that we love God with all our might, mind, and strength. If we do this throughout our lives, then Jesus Christ, through his Atonement, will help us become perfect (*Preparing for Exaltation Teacher's Manual: Religion 150*, p. 22).

In Mormonism, Jesus merely paves the way for a person to attain perfection, nothing more. It is left up to the individual to "give up (his or her) sins," which is supposed to be the proof "that we love God with all our might, mind, and strength." It's something that must be done "throughout our lives." Then and only then can we be helped in this impossible pursuit to become perfect.

That's not compatible with historical Christianity. Instead, the Bible teaches how the atonement is the act of bringing people together with God by means of a sacrifice.

Since all men and women are inherently sinful by nature as well as action, Philippians 2:7 reports that Christ made Himself of no reputation by taking "the form of a servant." He was made in human likeness and humbled Himself, becoming "obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (v. 8). Hebrews 2:17 says this was done in order that He might make "reconciliation for the sins of the people."

Matthew 1:21 says that Jesus would come to "save his people from their sins." No other conclusion can be made except that only God's personal intervention would be able to overcome humanity's sinful condition. If our personal merit could satisfy the penalty of sin, then no atonement would have even been necessary.

Galatians 2:21 says, "I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain." In Old Testament times, redemption was demonstrated through the ceremonial sacrifice. God made it clear that forgiveness would be provided only through the death of an innocent substitute that represented the payment for the penalty of sin. Sacrifices were made in the Jerusalem temple on a regular basis for the sins of individuals; however, the people of Israel celebrated the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur, once a year. On this sacred day, the Jewish high priest would offer sacrifice for Israel as a nation, which sought reconciliation with the God whom they had offended.

Still, the mere act itself of killing an animal for one's sins did not appease God. Through many examples, the Bible states that redemption was based on an individual's faith in what the sacrifice represented. This faith would lead to the obvious act of repentance, thereby making the sacrifice satisfactory. God had no pleasure in sacrifice without these two important elements.

This principle can be seen in the example of Cain and Abel. Genesis 4:3–5 says that both Cain and Abel offered sacrifices to the Lord, "but unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect." The writer of Hebrews explained that Abel's sacrifice was accepted because, unlike Cain's, it was offered in righteous faith (Heb. 11:4). Since the wages of sin is death (both physical and spiritual), the repentant sinner sees the sacrifice as a vicarious substitute. The animal was symbolically taking on itself the penalty due sinful people.

Christian theologian Leon Morris wrote:

> Nobody who came thoughtfully to God by the way of sacrifice could be in any doubt but that sin was a serious matter. It could not be put aside by a lighthearted wave of the hand but required the shedding of blood. . . . No-one who came to God by the way of offering the best in his flock would put a low value on the privilege of such an approach. He

> would realize, as many of us today do not, that the service of God must cost us something (*The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance*, pp. 50-51).

Unfortunately, as time went on, many Jews offered sacrifice out of mere protocol, not by faith. To many the significance of what the sacrifice represented was lost in legalistic attitudes. The New Testament book of Hebrews explains that the animal sacrificial system typified what Christ would do when He would voluntarily pay the price of sin through His own death. Morris adds:

> The high priest could do no more than enter the Holy of Holies himself. He could not take anyone with him. And he could enter only on the one day in the year. The fullest exercise of his ministry with all the solemnity at his command obtained only a very limited access: access on one day for him only. The people must forever be content with access by proxy. But in Hebrews there is emphasis on two wonderful truths: Christ secured access into the very presence of God in heaven (as we have just seen, Heb. 9:11–12, 24) and access not for himself only but for all his people as well. . . . Because Christ's blood was shed, all who believe in him have access into the very holiest of all. (Ibid., p. 84).

Another Christian theologian, A. W. Tozer, wrote,

> The theme of bloodguiltiness is a recurring theme in the Bible and here we have two concepts. The Old Testament picture is that of the blood of murdered Abel crying out for justice; the New Testament picture is that of the blood of Jesus Christ the Savior and mediator crying from the throne of God for mercy! (*Echoes from Eden: The Voices of God Calling Man*, p. 41).

To be sure, Christians throughout the centuries have seen the atonement of Christ as God's way of reconciling sinful humanity to Himself. Through the sacrifice of God's Son, those who were once enemies of God can now know that the barrier that separated them from their Creator has been removed. So powerful is this sacrificial act that believers can be assured that *all* their sins—past, present, and future—are now forgiven.

Colossians 2:13–14 reads:

> And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. (ESV)

Although it takes a little time to explain, I think this Christian website does a thorough job:

The truth of the matter is that, on our own and by our own efforts, we can't possibly be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. We don't love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We don't love our neighbors as ourselves. We have a problem, and it's called sin. We are born with it, and we cannot overcome the effects of it on our own.

Sin radically affects us to our core. Sin affects what we do, say, and think. In other words, it taints everything about us. Therefore, no matter how good we try to be, we will never meet God's standard of perfection. The Bible says that all of our righteous deeds are like a "polluted garment" (Isaiah 64:6). Our own righteousness is simply not good enough and never will be, no matter how hard we try.

That's why Jesus lived a perfect life in full obedience to the law of God in thought, word, and deed. Jesus' mission wasn't simply to die on the cross for our sins but also to live a life of perfect righteousness. Theologians refer to this as the "active and passive obedience of Christ." Active obedience refers to Christ's life of sinless perfection. Everything He did was perfect. Passive obedience refers to Christ's submission to the crucifixion. He went willingly to the cross and allowed Himself to be crucified without resisting (Isaiah 53:7). His passive obedience pays our sin debt before God, but it is the active obedience that gives us the perfection God requires.

The apostle Paul writes, "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe" (Romans 3:21–22). Through our faith in Christ, the righteousness of God is given to us. This is called "imputed" righteousness. To impute something is to ascribe or attribute something to someone.

When we place our faith in Christ, God ascribes the perfect righteousness of Christ to our account so that we become perfect in His sight. "For our sake he made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Not only is Christ's righteousness imputed to us through faith, but our sin is imputed to Christ. That is how Christ paid our sin debt to God. He had no sin in Himself, but our sin is imputed to Him so, as He suffers on the cross, He is suffering the just penalty that our sin deserves. That is why Paul can say, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

By having the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, we can be seen as sinless, as Jesus is sinless. It is not, therefore, our perfection, but His. When God looks at the Christian, He sees the holiness, perfection, and righteousness of Christ. Therefore, we can say with confidence, "I am sinless, as Jesus is sinless." Source

Well said. As the great High Priest, Jesus did much more than pave the way for believers to attain perfection. Indeed, He has made His people "perfect" through His shed blood on the cross.

Let our personal lives, our homes, and our work performance reflect our Christlike character. So live that others will say about you, "There is a true Christian!" Yes, we believe in Jesus Christ, but more—we look to Him, we trust Him and strive to emulate His attributes. Christ is our ideal. He is our exemplar. … The best measure of true greatness is how Christlike we are. To be like the Savior—what a challenge for any person! He is a member of the Godhead. He is the Savior and Redeemer. He was perfect in every aspect of His life. There was no flaw nor failing in Him. Is it possible for us … to be even as He is? The answer is yes. Not only can we, but that is our charge, our responsibility. He would not give us that commandment if He did not mean for us to do it [see Matthew 5:48; 3 Nephi 12:48].

As a Christian, I am all for "emulating" the attributes of Jesus. Believers have been commanded to put on Christ. Romans 13:14 states, "Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh."

At the same time, we must realize that it is what Christ did for us, not what we can perform through Christ's power, that justifies a person. As the quote I gave above states, the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us. It's not a cooperative effort. Jesus doesn't give us marching orders for us to perform and then expect us to attain His status. Rather, salvation is only a gift that we receive freely and then we do good works based on the regeneration that has taken place in our lives.

Of course, Matthew 5:48 has been taken out of context by too many Mormons—including Ezra Taft Benson. Jesus was not at all Jesus was not at all addressing the subject of personal or even sinless perfection. The context points to a consistency of behavior toward believers and unbelievers alike. While it is common for some to repay evil deeds done in a vengeful manner, Jesus was saying that His disciples should take the high road and repay evil with good. As Jesus said, even Gentiles reciprocate good behavior (Matt. 5:44–47). Although it certainly is not easy, Christians should go beyond this expected response and treat favorably even those who treat them badly. For more on this issue, click here.

The Apostle Peter, here pictured with the resurrected Jesus Christ, taught about how we can emulate the Savior's character. The Apostle Peter spoke of the process by which a person can be made a partaker "of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). This is important, for if we truly become partakers of the divine nature, we shall become like Him. Let us examine closely what Peter teaches us about this process. Here is what he said: "And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; "And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; "And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly

kindness charity" (2 Peter 1:5–7). The virtues outlined by Peter are part of the divine nature, or the Savior's character. These are the virtues we are to emulate if we would be more like Him.

To explain this passage, see an explanation of 2 Peter 1 here.

Let us discuss a few of these important traits. The first characteristic, to which all the others are added, is faith. Faith is the foundation upon which a godlike character is built. …

Faith…in the true God and Jesus as described in the Bible…is crucial!

The Savior declared that life eternal is to know the only true God and His Son Jesus Christ (see John 17:3). If this is true, and I bear you my solemn witness that it is true, then we must ask how we come to know God. The process of adding one godly attribute to another, as described by Peter, becomes the key to gaining this knowledge that leads to eternal life.

I agree with Benson. It is vital "to know the only true God and His Son Jesus Christ." I contend, though, that the God and Jesus of Mormonism is distinct from the biblical version. And that concerns me. A person can be "honest," "virtuous," and so much more, but these will not qualify anyone for heaven. To find out more, here are three links that you ought to consider to see if you qualify for eternal life, as taught by the Bible.

- How can a person get into heaven?
- GotForgiveness.com
- How can I be sure I am saved?

The Savior will comfort us and lift us up in our efforts to stay on the path He has marked for us. To the extent that we stray from the path marked out for us by the Man of Galilee, to that extent we are failing in our individual battles. … But we are not without his help. Again and again he told his disciples, and all of us, "Let not your heart be troubled. …" "If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it." "I will not leave you comfortless. …" "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you. …" (John 14:1, 14, 18, 27.)

There is peace in Jesus as described in the Bible. But Mormonism teaches that peace only comes when we "stay on the path He has marked for us." It is something no mortal can obtain. With such a philosophy, there can be no "peace." This particular chapter–the last one in this particular manual– is being taught at LDS chapels all across the world on Sunday, December 21, 2015.

This is the time of year when the greatest *gift* ever given is celebrated: the baby Jesus who came to save His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). Instead of encouraging people to exalt in this gift and receive it freely, Benson's main emphasis is staying on the path, which must be done in order to qualify for eternal life. What a contrast to the message of this most wonderful Season!

Let us turn again to the Book of Mormon … to learn some principles about coming unto Christ, being committed to Him, centered in Him, and consumed in Him. We will quote but a few of the numerous passages on the matter. First, we need to know that Christ invites us to come unto Him. "Behold, he sendeth an invitation unto all men, for the arms of mercy are extended towards them, … Yea, he saith: Come unto me and ye shall partake of the fruit of the tree of life" (Alma 5:33–34). Come, for he stands "with open arms to receive you" (Mormon 6:17). Come, for "he will console you in your afflictions, and he will plead your cause" (Jacob 3:1). "Come unto him, and offer your whole souls as an offering unto him" (Omni 1:26). As Moroni closed the record of the Jaredite civilization, he wrote, "I would commend you to seek this Jesus of whom the prophets and apostles have written" (Ether 12:41).

I don't believe the Book of Mormon is Scripture, but I don't have a problem saying that there is a general call of invitation to all to "partake of the fruit of the tree of life." However, Mormonism says this is only the beginning of the requirement for exaltation.

In Moroni's closing words written toward the end of the Nephite civilization, he said, "Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, … and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you" (Moroni 10:32).

I already spoke about Moroni 10:32 above. To me, this verse contradicts Benson's previous paragraphs. The Mormon Jesus is saying, "Come unto me AND DO EVERYTHING I COMMAND and ye shall partake of the fruit of the tree of life." Jesus "stands with open arms to receive you IF YOU ARE COMPLETELY OBEDIENT IN EVERYTHING." "He will console you in your afflictions and he will plead your cause IF YOU DO YOUR PART BY BECOMING CLEAN AND KEEPING THE COMMANDMENTS." This, my friends, is not the Gospel of the "Jesus of whom the prophets and apostles have written." Rather, this gospel originates from a false version of Jesus. Indeed, it is possible to hold to a false gospel. As Galatians 1:8-9 says,

> But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!

As far as worshipping a Jesus who is different from what is described in the Bible, 2 Corinthians 11:4 states,

> For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.

If we want to partake of the authentic Jesus of the Bible, it's important to follow His words and embrace His Gospel. The teachings of Mormonism contradict the biblical precepts, which is why we must express caution. Jesus Himself taught in Matthew 7:

> 15 Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. 16 By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? 17 Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

If you are a Latter-day Saint, do yourself a favor. Be willing to look at both sides of the issue. Questions you ought to ask include:

- Is the First Vision account true? Joseph Smith and the First Vision
- Is the Book of Mormon authentic scripture? Book of Mormon

If these two historical events are not true, then the entire religion of Mormonism goes with it. When it comes to testing out historical events, Paul says we need to determine if the resurrection of Jesus is true, as explained in 1 Corinthians 15:

> 12 But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. 14 And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. 15 More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. 17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. 19 If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

I have studied the resurrection of Jesus from both Evangelical Chritian as well as atheist sources. Based on my study, I am convinced more than ever that this event really did take place and therefore Christians are not "to be pitied." The resurrection is true! For more on this, click 10 reasons to support the story of the Resurrection

Peter Barnes, a former JW friend of mine who is now with the Lord, was fond of saying, "Truth will never run from error, but error will always run from truth." If Mormonism is true, then faithful Latter-day Saint should have fear of researching the two questions above. If anything, a thorough study of these issues—even taking a close look at what the critics have to say—will only make your faith stronger than before. . . if they are true, historical events. And if they are

not historical, why would you want to stay in such a religion anyway? Indeed, take a look at all sides and may the truth win in the end!