

Apostasy and Restoration

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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has many beliefs in common with other Christian churches. But we have differences, and those differences explain why we send missionaries to other Christians, why we build temples in addition to churches, and why our beliefs bring us such happiness and strength to deal with the challenges of life and death. I wish to speak about some of the important additions our doctrines make to the Christian faith. My subject is apostasy and restoration.

Last year searchers discovered a Roman fort and city in the Sinai close to the Suez Canal. Though once a major city, its location had been covered by desert sands and its existence had been forgotten for hundreds of years (see "Remains of Roman Fortress Emerge from Sinai Desert," *Deseret News*, 6 Oct. 1994, p. A20). Discoveries like this contradict the common assumption that knowledge increases with the passage of time. In fact, on some matters the general knowledge of mankind regresses as some important truths are distorted or ignored and eventually forgotten. For example, the American Indians were in many respects more successful at living in harmony with nature than our modern society. Similarly, modern artists and craftsmen have been unable to recapture some of the superior techniques and materials of the past, like the varnish on a Stradivarius violin.

We would be wiser if we could restore the knowledge of some important things that have been distorted, ignored, or forgotten. This also applies to religious knowledge. It explains the need for the gospel restoration we proclaim.

When Joseph Smith was asked to explain the major tenets of our faith, he wrote what we now call the Articles of Faith. The first article states, "We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost." The Prophet later declared that "the simple and first principles of the gospel" include knowing "for a certainty the character of God" ("Conference Minutes," *Times and Seasons*, 15 Aug. 1844, p. 614). We must begin with the truth about God and our relationship to him. Everything else follows from that.

In common with the rest of Christianity, we believe in a Godhead of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. However, we testify that these three members of the Godhead are three separate and distinct beings. We also testify that God the Father is not just a spirit but is a glorified person with a tangible body, as is his resurrected Son, Jesus Christ.

When first communicated to mankind by prophets, the teachings we now have in the Bible were "plain and pure, and most precious and easy" to understand (1 Ne. 14:23). Even in the transmitted and translated version we have today, the Bible language confirms that God the Father and his resurrected Son, Jesus Christ, are tangible, separate beings. To cite only two of many such teachings, the Bible declares that man was created in the image of God, and it

describes three separate members of the Godhead manifested at the baptism of Jesus (see Gen. 1:27; Matt. 3:13–17).

In contrast, many Christians reject the idea of a tangible, personal God and a Godhead of three separate beings. They believe that God is a spirit and that the Godhead is only one God. In our view, these concepts are evidence of the falling away we call the Great Apostasy.

We maintain that the concepts identified by such nonscriptural terms as "the incomprehensible mystery of God" and "the mystery of the Holy Trinity" are attributable to the ideas of Greek philosophy. These philosophical concepts transformed Christianity in the first few centuries following the deaths of the Apostles. For example, philosophers then maintained that physical matter was evil and that God was a spirit without feelings or passions. Persons of this persuasion, including learned men who became influential converts to Christianity, had a hard time accepting the simple teachings of early Christianity: an Only Begotten Son who said he was in the express image of his Father in Heaven and who taught his followers to be one as he and his Father were one, and a Messiah who died on a cross and later appeared to his followers as a resurrected being with flesh and bones.

The collision between the speculative world of Greek philosophy and the simple, literal faith and practice of the earliest Christians produced sharp contentions that threatened to widen political divisions in the fragmenting Roman empire. This led Emperor Constantine to convene the first churchwide council in a.d. 325. The action of this council of Nicaea remains the most important single event after the death of the Apostles in formulating the modern Christian concept of deity. The Nicene Creed erased the idea of the separate being of Father and Son by defining God the Son as being of "one substance with the Father."

Other councils followed, and from their decisions and the writings of churchmen and philosophers there came a synthesis of Greek philosophy and Christian doctrine in which the orthodox Christians of that day lost the fulness of truth about the nature of God and the Godhead. The consequences persist in the various creeds of Christianity, which declare a Godhead of only one being and which describe that single being or God as "incomprehensible" and "without body, parts, or passions." One of the distinguishing features of the doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is its rejection of all of these postbiblical creeds (see Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991; *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols., New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1992, s.v. "Apostasy," "doctrine," "God the Father," and "Godhead").

In the process of what we call the Apostasy, the tangible, personal God described in the Old and New Testaments was replaced by the abstract, incomprehensible deity defined by compromise with the speculative principles of Greek philosophy. The received language of the Bible remained, but the so-called “hidden meanings” of scriptural words were now explained in the vocabulary of a philosophy alien to their origins. In the language of that philosophy, God the Father ceased to be a Father in any but an allegorical sense. He ceased to exist as a comprehensible and compassionate being. And the separate identity of his Only Begotten Son was swallowed up in a philosophical abstraction that attempted to define a common substance and an incomprehensible relationship.

These descriptions of a religious philosophy are surely undiplomatic, but I hasten to add that Latter-day Saints do not apply such criticism to the men and women who profess these beliefs. We believe that most religious leaders and followers are sincere believers who love God and understand and serve him to the best of their abilities. We are indebted to the men and women who kept the light of faith and learning alive through the centuries to the present day. We have only to contrast the lesser light that exists among peoples unfamiliar with the names of God and Jesus Christ to realize the great contribution made by Christian teachers through the ages. We honor them as servants of God.

Then came the First Vision. An unschooled boy, seeking knowledge from the ultimate source, saw two personages of indescribable brightness and glory and heard one of them say, while pointing to the other, “This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!” (JS—H 1:17.) The divine teaching in that vision began the restoration of the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. God the Son told the boy prophet that all the “creeds” of the churches of that day “were an abomination in his sight” (JS—H 1:19). We affirm that this divine declaration was a condemnation of the creeds, not of the faithful seekers who believed in them. Joseph Smith’s first vision showed that the prevailing concepts of the nature of God and the Godhead were untrue and could not lead their adherents to the destiny God desired for them.

After a subsequent outpouring of modern scripture and revelation, this modern prophet declared, “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit” (D&C 130:22).

This belief does not mean that we claim sufficient spiritual maturity to comprehend God. Nor do we equate our imperfect mortal bodies to his immortal, glorified being. But we can comprehend the fundamentals he has revealed about himself and the other members of the Godhead. And that knowledge is essential to our understanding of the purpose of mortal life and of our eternal destiny as resurrected beings after mortal life.

In the theology of the restored church of Jesus Christ, the purpose of mortal life is to prepare us to realize our destiny as sons and daughters of God—to become like Him. Joseph

Smith and Brigham Young both taught that “no man ... can know himself unless he knows God, and he can not know God unless he knows himself” (in *Journal of Discourses*, 16:75; see also *The Words of Joseph Smith*, ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980, p. 340). The Bible describes mortals as “the children of God” and as “heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:16–17). It also declares that “we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together” (Rom. 8:17) and that “when he shall appear, we shall be like him” (1 Jn. 3:2). We take these Bible teachings literally. We believe that the purpose of mortal life is to acquire a physical body and, through the atonement of Jesus Christ and by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel, to qualify for the glorified, resurrected celestial state that is called exaltation or eternal life.

Like other Christians, we believe in a heaven or paradise and a hell following mortal life, but to us that two-part division of the righteous and the wicked is merely temporary, while the spirits of the dead await their resurrections and final judgments. The destinations that follow the final judgments are much more diverse. Our restored knowledge of the separateness of the three members of the Godhead provides a key to help us understand the diversities of resurrected glory.

In their final judgment, the children of God will be assigned to a kingdom of glory for which their obedience has qualified them. In his letters to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul described these places. He told of a vision in which he was “caught up to the third heaven” and “heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter” (2 Cor. 12:2, 4). Speaking of the resurrection of the dead, he described “celestial bodies,” “bodies terrestrial” (1 Cor. 15:40), and “bodies telestial” (JST, 1 Cor. 15:40), each pertaining to a different degree of glory. He likened these different glories to the sun, to the moon, and to different stars (see 1 Cor. 15:41).

We learn from modern revelation that these three different degrees of glory have a special relationship to the three different members of the Godhead.

The lowest degree is the telestial domain of those who “received not the gospel, neither the testimony of Jesus, neither the prophets” (D&C 76:101) and who have had to suffer for their wickedness. But even this degree has a glory that “surpasses all understanding” (D&C 76:89). Its occupants receive the Holy Spirit and the administering of angels, for even those who have been wicked will ultimately be “heirs of [this degree of] salvation” (D&C 76:88).

The next higher degree of glory, the terrestrial, “excels in all things the glory of the telestial, even in glory, and in power, and in might, and in dominion” (D&C 76:91). The terrestrial is the abode of those who were the “honorable men of the earth” (D&C 76:75). Its most distinguishing feature is that those who qualify for terrestrial glory “receive of the presence of the Son” (D&C 76:77). Concepts familiar to all Christians

might liken this higher kingdom to heaven because it has the presence of the Son.

In contrast to traditional Christianity, we join with Paul in affirming the existence of a third or higher heaven. Modern revelation describes it as the celestial kingdom—the abode of those “whose bodies are celestial, whose glory is that of the sun, even the glory of God” (D&C 76:70). Those who qualify for this kingdom of glory “shall dwell in the presence of God and his Christ forever and ever” (D&C 76:62). Those who have met the highest requirements for this kingdom, including faithfulness to covenants made in a temple of God and marriage for eternity, will be exalted to the godlike state referred to as the “fulness” of the Father or eternal life (D&C 76:56, 94; see also D&C 131; D&C 132:19–20). (This destiny of eternal life or God’s life should be familiar to all who have studied the ancient Christian doctrine of and belief in deification or apotheosis.) For us, eternal life is not a mystical union with an incomprehensible spirit-god. Eternal life is family life with a loving Father in Heaven and with our progenitors and our posterity.

The theology of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ is comprehensive, universal, merciful, and true. Following the necessary experience of mortal life, all sons and daughters of God will ultimately be resurrected and go to a kingdom of glory. The righteous—regardless of current religious denomination or belief—will ultimately go to a kingdom of glory more wonderful than any of us can comprehend. Even the wicked, or almost all of them, will ultimately go to a marvelous—though lesser—kingdom of glory. All of that will occur because of God’s love for his children and because of the atonement and resurrection of Jesus Christ, “who glorifies the Father, and saves all the works of his hands” (D&C 76:43).

The purpose of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is to help all of the children of God understand their potential and achieve their highest destiny. This church exists to provide the sons and daughters of God with the means of entrance into and exaltation in the celestial kingdom. This is a family-centered church in doctrine and practices. Our understanding of the nature and purpose of God the Eternal Father explains our destiny and our relationship in his eternal family. Our theology begins with heavenly parents. Our highest aspiration is to be like them. Under the merciful plan of the Father, all of this is possible through the atonement of the Only Begotten of the Father, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. As earthly parents we participate in the gospel plan by providing mortal bodies for the spirit children of God. The fulness of eternal salvation is a family matter.

It is the reality of these glorious possibilities that causes us to proclaim our message of restored Christianity to all people, even to good practicing Christians with other beliefs. This is why we build temples. This is the faith that gives us strength and joy to confront the challenges of mortal life. We offer these truths and opportunities to all people and testify to their truthfulness in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.