

## Joseph Fielding McConkie, "The First Vision and Religious Tolerance," Nov 5, 2005, Joseph Smith Symposium, Palmyra, NY.

Editor's note: This is part 1 of a talk given by Joseph Fielding McConkie on November 5, 2005, at a Joseph Smith Symposium held in Palmyra, New York. *Meridian Magazine* (15 Nov 05)

In revelation both ancient and modern, the Lord refers to his own words as being "sharper than a two edged sword." [1] In modern vernacular, much that he said is "politically incorrect." It is judgmental, divisive, rigid, closed-minded, and all too often just plain embarrassing. In many of our instructional meetings, the teaching of ethics prevails over the teaching of doctrine simply to avoid giving offense or to avoid disagreement. Everyone is pleased to speak of God's love; rare are the mentions of his wrath or displeasure.

I have chosen to consider three touchy or sensitive texts that stand at the very heart of our theology. I do so to honor Joseph and Hyrum Smith, the great martyrs of our faith. They did not seal their testimony with their blood in the jail at Carthage so that we might teach ethics. They did not die in the hope that future generations of Latter-day Saints would go out and say to the world, "Look we are just like you."

In death, John Taylor said, they sought to put a seal on the revelations found in the Doctrine and Covenants and the Book of Mormon. [2] They sought neither acceptance nor approval on the part of the historical Christian world. Indeed, in all matters of faith they sought to stand independent of it. As ironic as it may seem to some, it was in this course and in this course alone that they and those who sustained them expected to find peace.

I invite you to join me in consideration of three passages of scripture, each of which comes from the revelations of the Restoration and each of which is frequently claimed by those not of our faith to be offensive to them. Even within the Church there are some that are uncomfortable with these texts and feel a need to be apologetic for them.

The first comes from the Lord's preface to the Book of Commandments, in which he refers to the Church recently organized by Joseph Smith as "the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth" (D&C 1:30); the second is a part of the Prophet's account of what we call the First Vision in which he asked the Lord which church he should join. "I was answered," the Prophet said, "that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong: and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that 'they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof'" (JS-H 1:19).

The third text comes from the Book of Mormon, in which Nephi speaking to those of our day said there would be "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" (1 Nephi 14:10).

### **Tolerance**

Before addressing each of these texts, I would like to make some brief observations about the principle of tolerance. You may be interested to know that the word "tolerance" traces back to merry old England at a time when they were experimenting with drugs and poison. The idea was to see how much they could administer to a person without killing him. Your level of "tolerance" was measured by the amount of poison you could endure before it killed you. [3]

When I was a young man, tolerance meant that we treated those with whom we disagreed with civility. It did not mean that we were obligated to accept their point of view. To many of the young people in my classes today, it means that we are to be non-judgmental, holding all men and all ideas to be equal and that it is morally wrong to say that something is morally wrong. It is not an unusual thing to have students cover willful disobedience in the blanket of God's love and to advance the idea of a universal salvation

that sounds dangerously like that advocated by Lucifer in the councils of heaven.

### **Being Christ-Like**

People like to equate tolerance with Christ-like behavior, which is in many ways a rather awkward fit. My assumption is that you too have noticed that the appeal for Christ-like behavior generally comes from people who have no meaningful understanding of how Christ behaved and who would be greatly surprised to find out.

When the dialogue between Christ and the woman from Canaan was read recently in a religion class at BYU, a number of the students were uneasy with the account of Christ's behavior. A number of attempts were made to excuse or justify it. One student suggested that in calling the woman a "dog," Christ was really using a term of endearment. Such an explanation does not fit well in the context of the story. Finally a young lady gave expression to the thought that troubled many of her classmates. With tears in her eyes she exclaimed, "But Jesus was so unchristian" (Matthew 15:21-28).

It was Isaiah who said that the Christ would come as "a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence" (Isaiah 8:14). The only way we can square the Jesus of the New Testament with the political correctness of our day (our modern version of tolerance) is to suppose that God is no longer offended by vulgarity, profanity, or immorality.

F.F. Bruce in his book, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, reminds us that Christ made many enemies. Bruce states: "The Jesus whom we meet in the Gospels, far from being an inoffensive person, gave offence right and left. Even his loyal followers found him, at times, thoroughly disconcerting. He upset all established notions of religious propriety. He spoke of God in terms of intimacy which sounded like blasphemy. He seemed to enjoy the most questionable company. He set out with open eyes on a road which, in the view of 'sensible' people, was bound to lead to disaster." [4]

As to how we as Latter-day Saints view those not of our faith and as to how we determine who in this world is "Christian" and who is not, may I suggest that though many in the Christian world are anxious to draw a circle and exclude us, we choose to draw a very large and inclusive circle. We will pray with any man who is willing to do so. Our bookstores do not contain anti-anybody literature, we do not attack those of other faiths in our missionary lesson plan, nor do we do so in our church services or in any class sponsored by the Church. We do not give out warnings against those of other faiths nor do we ever forbid our membership from listening to or talking to anyone they desire.

We seek to treat all that we meet on the path of life with dignity and respect and heartily join hands with all whose lives are founded on the principles of love and kindness. We esteem their religious rights as sacred, as our own, and are their allies in the defense of the same. As to enemies, we did not choose them, they have chosen us. We have always had them and we always will. Where we cannot befriend them we choose to live above them.

If any man or woman professes a belief in Christ we say, "So much to the good" they are at least on the road leading to gospel enlightenment. As my father noted, "It is better to be a partial Christian than a non-Christian. It is better to believe some of the doctrines of Christ rather than none at all. One truth paves the way for another, and we all need to advance in knowledge and understanding." [5]

We take it as an article of faith that "there are many yet on the earth among all sects, parties, and denominations, who are blinded by the subtle craftiness of men, whereby they lie in wait to deceive, and who are only kept from the truth because they know not where to find it" (D&C 123:12). So it is that we have, or yet will send missionaries to those of every nation, kindred, tongue, and people.

Those missionaries will endure all manner of insult and hardship to present our message, which they will do with remarkable patience and in great love. They are the peacemakers of whom Christ spoke in the Sermon on the Mount, and it is of them that Isaiah said, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation" (Matthew 5:9; Isaiah 52:7).

### **The Ecumenical Movement**

As a young man I was commissioned as an officer in the Army of the United States and assigned to serve as a chaplain. My first duty was to report to an officer's training school at Fort Hamilton in New York. There the Chief of Chaplains, a three star general by the name of Charley Brown, told us that our commission was to be the "grassroots of the ecumenical movement." There were one hundred of us in that class, representing every major faith in our country. We were instructed to work together. We were informed that it was a violation of military law for us to proselyte for our own faith. Were I to attempt to teach Mormonism to someone who was not already a Latter-day Saint would have been grounds for a court marshal. Such is the cost of an ecumenical movement.

I appreciate the observation of Elder Maxwell, who said, "There is today more ecumenicism, but there is also more shared doubt. More and more people believe less and less — but they do believe it together. The fewer the issues, the easier it is to get agreements. The fewer standards there are, the less there is for congregations to rebel against. Since knowing is tied to doing, and doing to knowing, there is an awful cycle in all of this." [6]

By revelation, we as a people have been charged to stand independent of the world (see D&C 78:14). In a directive to priesthood leaders President Packer stated, "It is important to maintain a cordial and cooperative relationship with the leaders and members of other denominations. Representatives of the Church should not join interfaith organizations that have as their focus ecumenical activities or joint worship services. Interfaith relationships should center on moral values and on community betterment. [7]

### **A Place for Boldness**

Our story begins with the First Vision, which in turn begins with Joseph Smith's desire to know which of all the churches were right and which he should join. Orson Pratt echoed the Prophet's telling of this story in a missionary tract published in Edinburgh Scotland in 1842. He stated the matter thus:

He [Joseph Smith] saw, that if he understood not the way, it would be impossible to walk in it, except by chance; and the thought of resting his hopes of eternal life upon chance, or uncertainties, was more than he could endure. If he went to the religious denominations to seek information, each one pointed to its particular tenets, saying — 'This is the way, walk ye in it;' while, at the same time, the doctrines of each were in many respects, in direct opposition to one another. It also occurred to his mind that God was the author of but one doctrine, and therefore could acknowledge but one denomination as his church, and that such denomination must be a people who believe and teach the one doctrine, (whatever it may be,) and build upon the same. He then reflected upon the immense number of doctrines, now in the world, which had given rise to many hundreds of different denominations. The great question to be decided in his mind, was — if any one of these denominations be the Church of Christ, which one is it? Until he could become satisfied in relation to this question, he could not rest contented. To trust to the decisions of fallible man, and build his hopes upon the same, without any certainty, and knowledge of his own, would not satisfy the anxious desires that pervaded his breast. To decide, without any positive and definite evidence, on which he could rely, upon a subject involving the future welfare of his soul, was revolting to his feelings. The only alternative, that seemed to be left him was to read the Scriptures, and endeavor to follow their directions. [8]

As you are aware, the Lord responded to Joseph Smith's question as to which church he should join stating that he should join "none of them" for they were "all wrong." According to his own testimony, he was "hated and persecuted" for his persistence in telling this story but he refused to desist in doing so for such a course he said "would offend God" and bring him "under condemnation." (JS-H 1:19, 25.) At issue is whether the principle applies in the same manner to you and me. In a hard lesson Joseph Smith made the mistake of "fearing man more than God," and setting "at naught" the counsels of God and as the Lord put it, "despising his word" which resulted in his having the gold plates taken from him (D&C 3:7).

Joseph Smith told his story at the peril of his life. We tell it at the peril of social acceptance; surely we can stand that tall. We are not insensitive to the fact that the declaration of the one true church doctrine can generate resistance and that it may be accompanied by observations to the effect that we are unchristian, narrow and bigoted.

Should we not then make one accommodation and set this doctrine aside? Elder Packer asked

rhetorically in a General Conference address. Would it not be better to have more accept what would be left of the gospel than the relatively few who are converted now? Our missionaries sift through thousands to find one convert. Our harvest may seem impressive, but we are but gleaners. As the scriptures have foretold, we gather "one of a city, and two of a family" (Jeremiah. 3:14). Some have recommended that we confine ourselves strictly to evidences of the gospel: happy family life, and temperate living, and so on.

Could we not use the words *better* or *best*? The word *only* really isn't the most appealing way to begin a discussion of the gospel. If we thought only in terms of diplomacy or popularity, surely we should change our course. But we must hold tightly to it even though some turn away...

We know there are decent, respectable, humble people in many churches, Christian and otherwise. In turn, sadly enough, there are so-called Latter-day Saints who by comparison are not as worthy, for they do not keep their covenants.

But it is not a matter of comparing individuals. We are not baptized collectively, nor will we be judged collectively. Good conduct without the ordinances of the gospel will neither redeem nor exalt mankind; covenants and the ordinances are essential. We are required to teach the doctrines, even the unpopular ones.

Yield on this doctrine, and you cannot justify the Restoration. The doctrine is true; it is logical. The opposite is not ... I find it so interesting that those who condemn us, reject the parallel path philosophy themselves when it comes to non-Christian religions. For if they do not, they have no reason to accept the Lord as our Redeemer or regard the Atonement as essential ... (Mark 16:16.) While the converging path idea is very appealing, it really is not reasonable.

Suppose schools were operated on that philosophy, with each discipline a separate path leading to the same diploma. No matter whether you study or not, pass the tests or not, all would be given the same diploma — the one of their choice. Without qualifying, one could choose the diploma of an attorney, an engineer, a medical doctor. Surely you would not submit yourself to surgery under the hands of a graduate of that kind of school! But it does not work that way. It cannot work that way — not in education, not in spiritual matters. There are essential ordinances just as there are required courses. There are prescribed standards of worthiness. If we resist them, avoid them, or fail them, we will not enter in with those who complete the course.

"Do you realize that the notion that all churches are equal presupposes that the true church of Jesus Christ actually does not exist anywhere?" [9]

Given that salvation cannot be found in both truth and error, let us ask a few simple questions. Is there a law in the universe that governs all things? Do we have to obey the law to obtain the desired results in all fields of activity? In the field of mathematics is it possible for ten people to add the same column of figures and come up with ten different answers and all of them be correct? Can a group of chemists set out to make a given substance all using different materials or using materials in different portions, and still arrive at the same results? Can we drop a weight from a high tower expecting a different result each time we drop it?

Knowing that laws govern all that we do in this temporal world, can we not suppose that laws in like manner govern all that happens in the eternal world? Can there be existence of any kind if there are no laws? And if such laws exist, can we suppose that we may lay claim to the blessings of heaven while we disregard the laws of heaven? If such laws declare that no unclean thing can enter the presence of God, can we justifiably suppose that we can enjoy his presence in a state of filthiness or rebellion?

It may be argued that we do not have the truth, that we do not possess the plan of salvation or the authority of the priesthood, but to argue that such a plan and the necessary priesthood does not exist anywhere is to argue against the existence of God. It is an argument of despair given birth in a dark corner of hell. It is to say that there are no laws by which we might obtain the blessings of heaven. It is to concede that there is no sure path that we can follow in an attempt to obtain the treasures of heaven. It is to liken the plan of salvation to a lottery.

Can you imagine telling Joseph Smith that he is not a Christian when he is the first man in 1600 years to whom Christ personally appeared? Don't you think you might feel just a little silly telling Joseph Smith that the canon of scripture is complete when you learn that Adam, Enoch, Abraham, Noah, Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist, Peter, James, and John, among others, all personally appeared to him and gave him instruction in addition to that which had been recorded in holy writ?

### **All are Not Equal**

Would the people who claim all churches (save ours) to be true be willing when sick to take any randomly selected combination of drugs to cure what ails them or administer the same to their children? Would they substitute sand for flour when baking bread arguing that as long as they were sincere, it could not possibly make any difference? Would they fill their gas tank with water, arguing that it too was a true liquid and was also a creation of God and that God loved all liquids the same?

Let us consider why the "one true church" doctrine is so offensive to some. If we start with the premise, as the traditional Christian world does, that God is incomprehensible — that no one can know anything about him with certainty — then you can be tolerant with all manner of views about God irrespective of how ridiculous they may be. The only view that you could not tolerate would be one of certainty. That is someone coming along and saying the plan of salvation isn't a matter of uncertainty or speculation, God can be known, he does speak, and there is a sure path that he has marked out for us to follow.

To declare such a doctrine makes you the skunk at the picnic. If you are right, everyone must repent, everyone must conform their thinking, their faith, and their lives to accord with the will of God. Be assured that anyone not interested in so conforming, must of necessity act offended to the very idea of the existence of such a path.

When we say that we are the only "true and living church upon the face of the earth" we are simply saying that we have been entrusted with the knowledge of those laws or truths by which salvation comes. We make no pretense to being better than any one else except as those laws make us better and that again is what we seek to share.

No missionary has ever told anyone that in order to join the Church, there were particular truths they would have to surrender in order to be baptized. To the contrary, missionaries tell those they are teaching that anything they have that is "virtuous, praiseworthy, or of good report" to hold to as tenaciously as they can, to bring it with them and we will add to it but never take from it.

By contrast, I have talked to a good number of missionaries from other faiths who sought to put a torch to the house of my understanding as a Latter-day Saint. Having burned it to the ground they have precious little to offer in its stead. To join this Church is to gain truth. To leave it is to lose truth. There are no exceptions. Indeed, there is not a truth in all the eternities that we can not enjoy in its fullness as Latter-day Saints. One of those truths is that every soul born into this world comes with the light of Christ and the promise that if they follow that light it will lead them to God and the covenant of salvation (D&C 88:45-48).

God, with whom no good thing goes unnoticed; God, whose right it is to judge both men and organizations, found it necessary to call upon Joseph Smith, Jr. to organize his Church anew on the earth. He did not do so because there was no redeeming value to be found in the Christian world. Quite to the contrary; he did it because there was sufficient goodness to justify reestablishing his Church.

We do not need to trip over the matter of God's love or the goodness of people throughout the world. It was because of that love and because of the goodness of many that he restored his Church and invited the historical Christian world to be the first to join it.

Thus nothing in our message exceeds in importance the announcement that there is a sure path — a one true and living church. There is no more positive message that we can take to the world. Let us not cause a spiritual eclipse by getting in the way of that message.

Two Churches Only  
By Joseph Fielding McConkie

*Editor's note: This is part 2 of a talk given by Joseph Fielding McConkie on November 5, 2005, at a Joseph Smith Symposium held in Palmyra, New York.*

### **“Creeds an Abomination”**

While I presided over the mission in Scotland, one of the prominent ministers in the city of Edinburgh came to my office seeking answers to questions about Mormonism. He said, “I have some tough questions to ask and I cannot get straight answers from your missionaries.”

I promised him straight answers and spent a couple of hours responding to his questions. I then said, “Now it is my turn. I have some tough questions to ask you.” I asked how he justified the Christian creeds. He buried his head in hands and was silent for a matter of minutes. Then he raised his head and said, “Our creeds are responsible for the dark ages.”

He was a good man, an honest man, who always treated our missionaries with respect. I told him what it meant to have living prophets, and that one of them was my great-grandfather from whom I received my name. I told him that my grandfather had received revelations from the Lord. He said he would like to see them. I read the Vision of the Redemption of the Dead to him from beginning to end without a word of commentary. It was as if a rushing of mighty wind filled my office. He wept as I read the revelation and I wept with him. When I finished, he said that he could not say that what I had read was not a revelation.

I share this story because I think it is important in responding to the matter of how we handle hard questions. There is strength and power to be found in standing on our own ground that cannot be had in any other way.

Are not the creeds spoken of in the First Vision simply a refill of the same prescription that killed the church in the meridian of time? Consider this text in a great revelation on the priesthood. “After they have fallen asleep [meaning the apostles] the great persecutor of the church, the apostate, the whore, even Babylon that maketh all nations to drink of her cup, in whose hearts the enemy, even Satan, sitteth to reign — behold he soweth the tares [that is the philosophies of men]; wherefore, the tares choke the wheat and drive the church into the wilderness.” (D&C 86:3).

My experience suggests that the weaving of the philosophies of men with scripture is as dangerous individually as it is collectively. It is an illegitimate union, the seed of which is not born under the covenant and the fruits produced, thereby do not engender the faith known to our forefathers and in the words of the Savior, “every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up” (Matthew 15:13).

### **Save Two Churches Only**

If we are concerned about not offending the world, the first thing we ought to do is to reject the Book of Mormon. Can you imagine a book telling someone who believed in infant baptism that they are “in the gall of bitterness and the bonds of iniquity,” that they have neither “faith, hope, nor charity,” and that they ought to be cast down to hell for the very thought? (Mormon 8:14).

Can you imagine a text that is so direct in describing a particular church during a particular part of earth's history as the church of the devil that it is virtually an unforgivable sin among Latter-day Saints to admit the truth of what is being said (1 Nephi 13:1-9)?

The Book of Mormon is uncompromising where breaking the laws of God are concerned. It teaches that the effects of sin are eternal and that the laws of God are absolute. Its prophets testify that Christ's atonement extends the hope of salvation to you and me by answering the ends of the law. Christ atoned to preserve the truth. To deny those truths is to deny Christ and the atonement. The anti-Christ's in the Book of Mormon all struck out against the law and in doing so denied the need for the atonement (Alma 1:4; 30:16-17). If the truths of salvation were not absolute there would have been no atonement; there would be no right, no wrong, no broken law, and no law to be mended. There would have been no Christ, no plan of salvation, and for that matter no God. (See 2 Nephi 2: 11-13; Alma 34:15-16; 42:11-25.)

Can it be any surprise that a book teaching such principles would, in describing the events following the Restoration of the gospel, contain a statement to the effect that “there are save two churches only,” the one being the church of the “Lamb of God, and the other being the church of the devil” and that everyone belongs to one or the other?

Let me suggest what is taking place here. In his instruction to Nephi, the angel of the Lord chooses the most emphatic language at his command to teach what is the most fundamental principle of the Christian faith. We are all subject to the fall of Adam and thus citizens of the kingdom of the devil. It is the fall that demands that we be born again, that we put off the natural man and become saints through the atonement of Christ (Moses 6:59; Mosiah 3:19).

The fall lays claim to all that have been born. Christ lays claim to those who have been born again. It is only by putting off the natural man that we become “saints,” or the “covenant people of the Lord.” Only then can we be numbered among the “church of the Lamb” (1 Nephi 14:14). The issue is one of citizenship not of judgment. No one will be judged until they have had the opportunity to accept or reject the true and living Christ of whom the Book of Mormon is a witness.

You can say what you want by way of criticism about the Book of Mormon. Give it whatever grade you think it deserves, but what you cannot say is that it lacks for plainness or that you cannot quite figure out where it stands relative to Christ and his gospel. On such matters it is plain, clear, and bold; its writers had no intention of being misunderstood. It is a theological Everest; you can try to cover it with flowers but you are not going to be able to hide it. Simply stated, it is a public relations nightmare.

As to why the Lord made it this way we may not know — but this much we do know, it is philosophically impossible to reject truth without accepting error, to shut out the light without being immersed in darkness, to reject true teachers without cleaving to false ones, to reject the true Christ and his prophets without giving allegiance to those who follow another Master. [10]

We cannot march with both the Israelites and the Philistines. Light and darkness will never meet. Christ and Satan will never shake hands. As to Christ and his gospel there can be no middle ground, there is no neutrality. You stand with the prophets or against them.

The Book of Mormon was ordained in the councils of heaven to gather latter-day Israel and return them to Christ. Thus there must of necessity be direction that leaves no question as to where the great caravan of Israel is headed.

Faith in the Restoration comes with a cost, and as John Taylor said, that cost included “the best blood of the nineteenth century to bring it forth for the salvation of a ruined world” (D&C 135:6). As the doctrine and spirit of the Book of Mormon are unyielding, so must the spirit of those who accept it be unyielding.

### **Common Ground**

As a mission president I discovered that the way we present our message has a good deal to do with who accepts it and how deeply their roots are anchored in the soil of the gospel. On this matter some things are obvious. For instance, it would be no great surprise to you that shallow missionaries get shallow converts. In like manner, I do not think you would be surprised to learn that the more direct we are the more successful we are. There is no reason that missionaries cannot ask everyone they meet if they would like to be baptized. What came as a surprise to me, however, was that nothing chased the dark spirit of contention away as effectively as the declaration of those very texts that seemed the most contentious. Let me share our experience.

During a round of zone conferences, I challenged the missionaries to proselyte for one month without taking their Bibles with them. This meant that they had to do all of their teaching from the Book of Mormon or the Doctrine and Covenants. I told them that any principle that they could not teach from those sources they had no business teaching because it was not a part of the message that the Lord had commissioned us to take to the ends of the earth. It seemed a reasonable assumption to us that if the gospel had indeed been restored and we in reality represented a new gospel dispensation, then we could teach the

message as the Lord had given it to us.

Between then and our next round of zone conferences, the reports flooded in. The missionaries spoke of a stronger, even an overwhelming spirit in their cottage meetings. It was obvious that the Holy Ghost liked being a part of what they were doing. What was noticeable to the mission president was the increased confidence that they took with them into the teaching situation when they knew they were standing on their own ground. The natural result of this was that somehow they started to find more people to teach than they ever had before. These things I expected but what I did not expect was the report that the spirit of contention, common to many of their efforts to teach, was now gone. After our one month experiment, our missionaries refused to return to their old methods. Their faith was centered in the revelations of the Restoration. They liked the spirit of the whole thing.

Can you see what was happening? They conceded the fact that they did not necessarily know any more about the Bible than those they taught. There was no reason for argument over the meaning of Bible passages which was not their message. Their message was that God had spoken through a living prophet and they stuck to that message. When those they were teaching understood this, they asked questions about what God had told the prophet about this, that, or the other thing, and with every question came the opportunity to open the revelations of the Restoration and let the light they contained shine. That light carries with it its own spirit. You can accept it or you can reject it but you cannot argue with it. Can you imagine arguing with Moses about whether the Lord gave him the Ten Commandments or not.

Surely, someone must have said, Moses, I do not think you got the Ten Commandments from God, I think Aaron wrote them and someone else must have explained that Moses was just quoting from a book that was really written by Miriam. And what will Moses say to all of this? "I got them from God; if you question that I suggest that you ask him about it."

That's our message: "Ask God." The way we answer questions about our faith ought to be by finding the quickest and most direct route to the Sacred Grove. The heavens are open, class is in session, its time to ask questions because God answers and if you do not get the answer from him you are not going to do very well on the test.

The Restoration began with Joseph Smith on his knees in the Sacred Grove and that is where the testimony of every Latter-day Saint must begin, on their knees in a sacred moment asking of God. Everything that we believe as Latter-day Saints rests on the reality of what God said that spring morning to Joseph Smith and *the great irony of it all is that the harder the saying, the more offensive it seems to the world, the more peace it brings, it is the very light that chases away the darkness of contention with all that are honest in heart.*

### **No Middle Ground**

Perhaps we need to rethink the idea of seeking common ground with those we desire to teach. *Every likeness we identify leaves them with one less reason to join the Church. When we cease to be different we cease to be.* The commandment to flee Babylon has not been revoked, nor has it been amended to suggest that we seek an intellectual marriage with those not of our faith. The fruit of such a marriage will always be outside the covenant.

One of our great revelations on missionary work says: "Ye are not sent forth to be taught, but to teach the children of men the things which I have put into your hands by the power of my Spirit" (D&C 43:15).

Could you imagine a vacuum salesman telling some one, "This vacuum is just like the one you already have, but if you buy it your parents will disown you and everyone in the neighborhood will hate you"? How many vacuums would you expect this salesman to sell?

I remember sitting in a priesthood meeting one Sunday morning in a small struggling ward in Scotland. There were five priesthood holders present, two missionaries, an investigator the missionaries had brought, and myself.

I do not remember the topic of the lesson. My thoughts were on the investigator. He was a man of fine

appearance, bright, and articulate. My thoughts were a few years down the road. I could not help but think what a fine bishop he would make.

The others present made a particular point to relate each principle that the teacher mentioned to some common ground between them and their Catholic visitor. When the meeting was over he turned to the missionaries and told them not to call on him or his family again. He said, "I see that you are a young struggling church and that you desire to become what the Catholic Church already is. Since I already have what you are seeking I see no reason to change." He left and that ended our association with him.

## Conclusion

As a mission president I was grateful for the three texts we have considered this morning. I needed something — not from me but from the Lord — that justified the faith and sacrifice that I knew membership in the Church would require.

That such texts will give offense to some is true. *Truth, however, is more important than harmony.* Were that not the case, there would have been no war in heaven, no gospel of Jesus Christ, and no reason for the Father and the Son to appear to Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove. If we are to be a Christ-like people, we must value truth above life itself. [11]

If we claim that our God speaks, that we have modern revelation and living prophets, we must of necessity claim that we are "the only true and living church on the face of the whole earth." The two doctrines are as inseparable as the body and the spirit in the resurrection. You cannot have the one without the other.

If our prophets are indeed prophets and our apostles indeed apostles then it is for them and them alone to mark the path which all must follow who would return to their divine Father. Claiming the authority to speak in the name of God and at the same time claiming that the heavens have been sealed since New Testament times is no different than claiming to be God's spokesman while admitting that he has not spoken to you for two thousand years. This picture simply does not hang straight.

True it is that there are those who think it quite "unchristian" of Latter-day Saints to suggest they cannot be saved in their errant doctrines. Yet it is the same people who hold the gates of heaven open to all who profess Christ except us. Why, we might ask is it that virtually all testimonies of Christ are acceptable in their heaven save ours? And why is it that we are labeled unchristian for not accepting them while their rejection of us is the proof they offer that they are Christian? Let it not be lost on you that it is their creeds that require them to respond in this manner.

To the early missionaries of this dispensation the Lord said, "Preach my gospel which ye have received, even as ye have received it" (D&C 49:2). There is no suggestion here that they cover it with honey or put ribbons on it. A few months later the Lord said, "What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself" (D&C 1:38). The Lord has never commissioned anyone to make excuses for him, he has simply asked us to trust him.

If the gospel message is true, it must by its very nature have things in it that require faith to accept. If we are going to get serious about it we can hardly expect to find gospel truths getting along compatibly with worldly fashions, nor can we expect them to get an approving nod from those who worship at the shrine of their own intellect.

*The plain fact of the matter is that you cannot build strong testimonies out of weak doctrine.* As there is no courage without a struggle, so there can be no spiritual strength without a challenge. We have claim to neither peace nor safety save we build on a strong foundation.

Any time we declare something to be true, we have picked a fight with that which is untrue. We cannot, as Marion G. Romney assured us, do the Lord's work without offending the devil. [12] It is as certain as the night following the day that we will never be able to declare our message without opposition or without giving offense to some. Moroni promised Joseph Smith that his name would be known for "good and evil among all nations, kindreds, and tongues, or that it should be both good and evil spoken of among all people" (JS-H 1:30). He also told Joseph Smith that, "Those not built upon the Rock will seek to

overthrow this church," and he then promised the Prophet that the church "will increase the more opposed." [13]

1 D&C 6:2; 11:2; 12:2; Hebrews 4:12

2 D&C 135:1

3 *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, [Second Edition, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994], p. 2075.

4 F. F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, [Hodder and Stoughton, 1983], p. 15.

5 Personal Correspondence

6 Neal A. Maxwell, *Things As They Really Are* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1978], 48-49.

7 Boyd K. Packer, Directive, May 9, 1995.

8 Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Joseph Smith's First Vision: Confirming Evidences and Contemporary Accounts*, 2d ed. rev. [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980], 170-71.

9 Boyd K. Packer, "The Only True Church," *Ensign*, October 1985, emphasis mine

10 Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah: The First Coming of Christ* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1978], p. 37.

11 I was deeply impressed some years ago when we as a faculty visited Plano, Illinois, and listened to their bishop, a very confident woman, of what was then called the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (today the Community of Christ), tell us that since their people left Nauvoo they had never known a day of persecution and had lived in harmony with those of all faiths. What a telling story.

12 Marion G. Romney, "The Prince of Peace," *Ensign*, October, 1983, p. 3.

13 *Messenger & Advocate* 2:199.