Topically Speaking:
A Look at the Impressive Doctrine and Covenants

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The Doctrine and Covenants is modern revelation. It contains the word of God, his commandments for our day and his teachings for our eternal understanding.

This collection of revelations received by the Prophet Joseph Smith and other Presidents of the Church is not just a mechanical, haphazard journal or scrapbook; it is remarkably comprehensive and complete. Its laws and doctrines have the qualities of timelessness, inspiration, and foresight. It epitomizes prophecy in all of its richest forms.¹

I have had a testimony of the Doctrine and Covenants for years. Yet many of the most astounding achievements of the book were for a long time obscure to me, for several reasons. First, in some ways it reads like a random diary. What it contains is mostly raw data, primary source material, and unprocessed firsthand experiences. While such records are of utmost importance, they are usually not the easiest to read.

Moreover, there is no presently recognizable order in which revelations were given to Joseph Smith. The Lord did not give all of his instructions about the priesthood—or missionary work, or Church organization, or the scriptures—in tidy packages all at once. He gave them as the need or question arose, from day to day, in an order that—to us—seems unpredictable. The Doctrine and Covenants today is still printed the same way, section by section, not systematically or topically or even in the order in which all the revelations were received.

For these reasons, it was harder for me to read the Doctrine and Covenants than, for example, the exciting narratives of Nephi or the unforgettable parables of the New Testament. Reading the sections of the Doctrine and Covenants was, in some ways, like reading the letters of Paul, each one dealing with its own topic and insight. Because of its fragmentary nature, it generally took me a long time and required considerable patience to read the Doctrine and Covenants straight through, even though the entire book is really quite short—only about two hundred pages of the revelations themselves.

As I searched for a more effective way to study the Doctrine and Covenants, I came to realize that it primarily addresses only certain themes and sets out to accomplish certain particular identifiable objectives. When I began to think of the book in terms of its themes and objectives, and to study it topically, I began to notice how well the book accomplishes this. I am impressed that its themes are handled so completely and consistently, even though the revelations were received piecemeal, line upon line, here a little and there a little. The comprehensiveness of the book is even more remarkable when we remember that Joseph Smith’s life was far from tranquil. Time to review, revise, evaluate, do research, or fill in gaps was rarely available to him. Yet, when his short time ran out, the job was done.

What are the themes and objectives in the Doctrine and Covenants? They can be organized in many ways—and various students of the book have proposed outlines.² A few years ago I undertook to make my own outline of topics by classifying each section in the Doctrine and Covenants (or paragraph within larger sections), trying to account for every passage in the book by theme. I tried to let each text speak as much as possible for itself and tried to answer for each section the questions, “What is this section talking about?” and “What is this section trying to do?” Out of this emerged, from my perspective, seven main themes. I have seen them as follows:

1. The Voice of Warning
2. The Plan of Salvation
3. The Scriptures
4. The Priesthood
5. Church Organization and Administration; Commandments to Church Members
6. Missionary Work and Instruction to Missionaries
7. Personal Instructions to Individuals

In addition, I placed as an epilogue the accounts of the martyrdom of Joseph Smith, found in sections 135 and 136:34–42.

In my judgment, these seven themes cover every verse in the Doctrine and Covenants. Organizing the book this way has helped me grasp and hold a mental image of what the book is about. The resultant understanding transforms what was previously for me a blur of sections into a clear and impressive picture, and this helps to give the book meaning in my life.³

Let me discuss the themes I see in the book.
1. The Voice of Warning

In many sections of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord sounds a clarion voice of warning. This is an important theme running through many portions of this volume of scripture. It was important enough that A Voice of Warning was the title Parley P. Pratt gave one of his most popular early tracts about the Restoration.

Rarely has there been a more stunning incantation of woes than is found in the Doctrine and Covenants. Warnings are given to all the world, to the wicked, to the righteous, to kings, and to paupers. (See, for example, D&C 1:1–23; D&C 5:5–8; D&C 124:3–11.) No one will escape the day of God’s judgment. God expects us to take his revelations seriously, and no one who reads this book can say he or she has not been warned. (See D&C 124:7.) The Lord says: “And all they who receive the oracles of God, let them beware how they hold them lest they are accounted as a light thing, and are brought under condemnation thereby.” (D&C 90:5.) Again and again, in dozens of places, the Lord calls for us to hearken and give heed, “lest death shall overtake you” (D&C 45:2), for the day of judgment will surely come upon all who are in the world (see D&C 1:30–39).

In these verses, the Lord is giving notice to the world. He makes it unmistakably clear that severe judgments will fall upon mankind because of their willful unrighteousness. (See D&C 56:14–20.) He expresses his unequivocal displeasure with sin (see D&C 1:31), and speaks of his wrath being kindled against the wicked (see D&C 5:8; D&C 63:2).

But this voice of warning is not a voice of irrational rage. Indeed, it would be somewhat unfair if the Lord were to judge the world without first giving it a full warning and a fair chance to repent. Moreover, the revelations go on at great length to extend an arm of mercy and an invitation to repentance.

Further meaning is given to these warnings when the revelations place an obligation upon all who have been warned to warn their neighbors. (See D&C 88:81–86; D&C 29:3–21.) And for those who suffer chastisement or tribulation, additional blessings are implied. (See D&C 101:1–9; D&C 103:1–20; D&C 121:1–19; D&C 127:1–4.) In the end, the voice of warning promises blessings to those who heed the words of the Lord and establish Zion. (See D&C 35:7–18; D&C 58:1–12; D&C 97:12–28; D&C 100:13–17; D&C 64:31–43.)

For the most part today, we have lost the ancient religious notion of curses being heaped upon the wicked or the lawbreakers, and of blessings being pronounced upon the good and the righteous. This, however, was an important part of ancient covenant making, vividly employed by the prophets in the covenant-making texts of the Old Testament, notably in Deuteronomy 7, 8, and 27. Just as these cursings and blessings made the ancients aware of the seriousness of their covenants with God, so the words of warning scattered throughout the modern Doctrine and Covenants should awaken us to the reality of the rewards and punishments which attend our modern covenants with God.

2. The Plan of Salvation

The Lord makes covenants with his children in order to bring about their salvation and eternal life. Thus, it is not surprising that the Doctrine and Covenants has much to say about God’s eternal plan of salvation. What came as a surprise to me, however, was to find how complete and panoramic the Doctrine and Covenants is with respect to its vision of the plan of salvation. In many cases, the Doctrine and Covenants is our sole source of clear knowledge about these doctrines.

Here the reader learns of the basic relationship between God and man. Topics covered include the following: the Godhead—“The Father has a body of flesh and bones” (D&C 130:22–23); Jesus Christ—“That through him all might be saved” (D&C 76:11–24); premortal life (see D&C 29:31–39; D&C 93:21–38; D&C 138:53–56); the creation of the world, the fall of Adam, and the worth of souls (see D&C 29:35–45; D&C 18:10–13); human agency to obey and, obtain forgiveness and grow in light and truth (see D&C 130:20–21; D&C 64:1–14; D&C 93:1–40); the existence of deceptive pitfalls along the way and how one can discern them properly (see D&C 49:15–23; D&C 52:14–20; D&C 46:8–33); the second coming of Christ and his Millennial reign (see D&C 45:39–59; D&C 49:24–28; D&C 63:49–54; D&C 88:87–116; D&C 133; D&C 43:30–33); the resurrection and degrees of glory and kingdoms in general (see D&C 88:14–61; D&C 138; D&C 76:50–119); the attainment of the highest degree of glory through the covenant of eternal marriage (see D&C 132); and ultimately the infliction of eternal punishment upon Satan and his ardent followers who reject the atonement of Jesus Christ (see D&C 76:25–49; D&C 19:6–20).

The cumulative vision of these many segments offers each individual a comprehensive insight into his or her own eternal spiritual autobiography. This sees up and down the path of life, from the beginning to the end, as far as anyone could ever hope to see from where we now stand. It identifies landmarks along that road with the knowledge of one who has already walked that way.

3. The Scriptures

Another unmistakable theme that resounds through
the Doctrine and Covenants is the importance of knowing and following the word of God. Time and again, these revelations show God’s concern over the scriptures. He was intimately involved with the process of bringing forth the Book of Mormon. He was deeply concerned about our understanding of the Bible. He made it clear that anyone who neglects the scriptures does so at the peril of severe condemnation. (See D&C 84:54, 57.) Accordingly, many sections of the Doctrine and Covenants deal directly with scripture. One section defines what scripture is. (See D&C 68:1–6.) Other sections affirm the fact that the Book of Mormon was translated “through the mercy of God, by the power of God” (D&C 1:29; D&C 20:8), and give instructions about the translation and importance of the Book of Mormon (see D&C 3:16–20; D&C 5:1–31; D&C 10:17). There are revelations about the publication of the Book of Commandments (the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants; see D&C 67:1–9), and about Joseph Smith’s inspired translation of the Bible (see D&C 45:60–61; D&C 73:3–6). Several specific passages from the Bible are explained. 6 And there is even a revelation about the Apocrypha (see D&C 91), containing insights which can rightly be said to have been a hundred years before their time.

4. The Priesthood

Hand in hand with the return of the Book of Mormon came the restoration of the keys of the priesthood. The Doctrine and Covenants returns over and over to the themes of the priesthood, delivering an extensive basic handbook on the nature, the offices, and the ordinances of the priesthood of God. This document constitutes the essential order of the priesthood.

It begins with sacred accounts of the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood (see D&C 2; D&C 13; D&C 65), the restoration of the keys of the Melchizedek Priesthood (see D&C 27:5–14; D&C 110:6–16), and of extending the rights of holding the priesthood to all worthy males (see OD—2). The full organization and essential nature of the priesthood is then expounded in rich detail in many sections. (See, for example, D&C 124:123ff; D&C 20:60ff; D&C 84:14–42.) The specificity extends to remarkable lengths, as each office of the priesthood with its attendant duties is defined in terms which are both inspirational and practical. This covers the complete spectrum, dealing with the calling of the prophet and the creation of the First Presidency (see D&C 21; D&C 28:2–3, 7; D&C 43:1–14; D&C 81; D&C 90; D&C 107:9–10); the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (see D&C 18:26ff; D&C 107:23ff; D&C 118); bishops and the Presiding Bishop (see D&C 58:13–20; D&C 68:13–24; D&C 72; D&C 90:22–23; D&C 107:15–17, 68–76); the high council and high priests, complete with rules of procedure for the conduct of a high council court (see D&C 102); the seventies (see D&C 107:24–26, 34–35, 93–97); the elders (see D&C 20:38–45; D&C 36:4–8; D&C 42:12–17; D&C 43:15–20; D&C 107:11–12, 89–90); the patriarchs (see D&C 107:39–57); priests (see D&C 20:46–52; D&C 107:87–88); teachers (see D&C 20:53–59); and deacons (see D&C 107:85–86).

The Doctrine and Covenants goes yet another step as it spells out in clear detail the manner in which priesthood officers should discharge their duties and how they should perform the ordinances of the priesthood. The latter part of section 121 (D&C 121) is an unparalleled treatise on how one should exercise the rights of the priesthood. In other sections one finds discussions on blessing children (see D&C 20:70), healing the sick (see D&C 42:43–52), baptism (see D&C 20:37, 71–74; D&C 22; D&C 128:12–14), the sacrament (see D&C 20:68–69, 75–79; D&C 27:1–14), the endowment (see D&C 105:12, 18, 33–37), baptism for the dead (see D&C 127:5–12; D&C 128:1–5, 15–25), the dedicatory prayer for the Kirtland Temple (see D&C 109), and the reception of members into the School of the Prophets (see D&C 88:127–141).

5. Church Organization and Administration; Commandments to Church Members

Holding the power of the priesthood of God, the Saints are authorized to act as the body of Christ. The Doctrine and Covenants instructs this group how to act. These instructions are inspired, perceptive, concise, demanding, and rewarding. When seen with all they embrace, they inspire nothing less than our best and highest degrees of sacrifice and obedience.

Besides affirming that the Church was established by God and is “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, with which I, the Lord, am well pleased” (D&C 1:30), the Doctrine and Covenants gives us many principles important for Church administration. These include the use of membership records (see D&C 20:84), the keeping of a history of the Church (see D&C 47), and the conduct of meetings (see D&C 41:2–6; D&C 46:1–6; D&C 26:2).

A list of personal commandments also emerges from the Doctrine and Covenants. No person desiring to live a life pleasing to Father in Heaven could do any better than to take cues from the laws of the gospel revealed here. These rules give guidance with respect to murder, theft, dishonesty, adultery, brotherly kindness, pride,
Idleness, fairness, and the obligation to teach and warn others. (See D&C 42:18–93.) Also included is counsel on the observance of the Sabbath (see D&C 68:29), loving the Lord and one's neighbor (see D&C 59), treating others as equals (see D&C 38:16, 23–27), supporting one's family and teaching one's children (see D&C 68:25–28), the Word of Wisdom (see D&C 89), preparing for Christ's coming (see D&C 101:43–62), behaving humbly and properly (see D&C 136:19–33), seeking education (see D&C 88:70–126; D&C 97:1–5), dealing with war and adversity (see D&C 87; D&C 98:11–48), obeying the laws of the land (see D&C 123; D&C 58:21–23; D&C 98:4–10; D&C 101:76–95; D&C 134), gathering and building Zion (see, for example, D&C 97:12–24), caring for the poor and the widows (see D&C 83; D&C 78), and avoiding materialism and debt (see D&C 117:4–9; D&C 38:39; D&C 64:21–30; D&C 42:30–39; D&C 104:1–18). Several of these sections might seem dated to a modern reader, since they instruct the Church to build specific buildings, like the temples in Kirtland and in Missouri, and the Nauvoo House in Nauvoo. But behind even these instructions are vital precepts of how we today must learn to deal unselfishly with property. Often the message is expressly stated, in forms which we can easily recognize in our own lives as the laws of consecration (see D&C 104:47–86), tithing (see D&C 119), stewardship (see D&C 70), and temple building. The scope and depth of this list is certainly impressive.

6. Missionary Work and Instructions to Missionaries

Worthy of a category by itself are the sections dealing with missionary work, including specific instructions to those called to preach the gospel. These sections form a sizable collection, reflecting the importance of missionary work to the Lord, to the Church, and to the individual. The instructions begin with the indispensable fourth section [D&C 4]:

“Now behold, a marvelous work is about to come forth among the children of men.

“Therefore, O ye that embark in the service of God, see that ye serve him with all your heart, might, mind and strength, that ye may stand blameless before God at the last day.

“Therefore, if ye have desires to serve God ye are called to the work;

“For behold the field is white already to harvest; and lo, he that thrusteth in his sickle with his might, the same layeth up in store that he perisheth not, but bringeth salvation to his soul;

“And faith, hope, charity and love, with an eye single to the glory of God, qualify him for the work.

“Remember faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, brotherly kindness, godliness, charity, humility, diligence.

“Ask, and ye shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. Amen.”

Every member and missionary will benefit by knowing all that the Doctrine and Covenants instructs on missionary work. (See, for example, D&C 33; D&C 38:40–42; D&C 42:1–9; D&C 68:7–12; D&C 71; D&C 75; D&C 84:60–120.) Also powerful are the missionary calls extended to many individuals in the Doctrine and Covenants.

7. Personal Instructions to Individuals

In addition to containing missionary calls to particular individuals, the Doctrine and Covenants records private revelations to specific people. Over fifty people are named. They range from Almon Babbitt, John C. Bennett, and Stephen Burnett to Lyman Wight, Frederick G. Williams, and Brigham Young. Taken individually, these private statements are often skipped over and disregarded by the casual reader. Yet, taken collectively, they convey a forceful message of God’s love and concern for people—that he knows and cares what individuals do. Reading all the revelations in this long series—one after the other—has left a lasting impression on me: that after all the Doctrine and Covenants says about books and institutions, rules and regulations, the gospel which it embodies still boils down to love for “the one”—finding the lost sheep, welcoming home the prodigal son—for the worth of souls is great.

These statements to specific individuals are also important for another reason: many of them are expressions of general principles from which all people can benefit. For example, personal instructions to Joseph Smith and Newel K. Whitney serve as reminders to us all:

“Verily I say unto Joseph Smith, Jun.—You have not kept the commandments, and must needs stand rebuked before the Lord;

“Your family must needs repent and forsake some things, and give more earnest heed unto your sayings, or be removed out of their place. …

“My servant Newel K. Whitney also, a bishop of my church, hath need to be chastened, and set in order his family, and see that they are more diligent and concerned at home, and pray always, or they shall be removed out of their place.” (D&C 93:47–48, 50.)

It is clear that each reader should apply in his own life the general principles included in the Lord’s instructions to someone else: “What I say unto one I say
1. The word prophecy comes from the Greek words pro and phasis, which mean “before” and “speak,” hence “to foretell the future.” But the word prophecy can also mean “to speak forth,” “to cry out,” “to have foresight or wisdom,” and “to declare.” In Hebrew, the word for prophecy may derive from an ancient root meaning “to call,” “to proclaim,” or “to impart.” A prophet was a keeper of the covenant, a mediator, messenger, and authoritative interpreter. Thus, the word prophecy has many important meanings and dimensions. The Doctrine and Covenants reflects them all. See G. Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1968), 6:781–861.


3. Different approaches to the study of the Doctrine and Covenants, of course, have been taken by others. One of these is the historical approach, which emphasizes the time, the place, and the background of each section of the Doctrine and Covenants. Each of these approaches—chronological and topical—has certain benefits and drawbacks. I present this topical approach as an additional study option.

4. This notion is not generally a part of the Anglo-American concept of fairness and justice, but the principle is found in a unique aspect of Jewish law, which held that ignorance of the law was a good defense to any criminal charge, and that it was incumbent upon the prosecution to “show that the accused was, immediately before the commission of the offense, expressly warned by two competent witnesses that it would be unlawful for him to commit it, and that if he committed it he would be liable to that specific penalty provided for it by law.” M. Elon, *Encyclopedia Judaica: The Principles of Jewish Law* (Jerusalem:Keter Pub. House, 1975), p. 473.

Near East can be found in the Epilogue to Law Code of Hammurabi.