Teachings Concerning
The Premortal Existence of Man
for Class Room Discussion

Knowledge of the Premortal Existence is Essential in Understanding Earth Life

Boyd K. Packer Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

I don’t know of any idea that helps us make sense out of life as much as this fundamental truth: We lived as spirit children—individual, intelligent sons and daughters of God—before our mortal birth. So many things in life can be understood only if we know there was a premortal life, and so many things can never be understood without that knowledge. (Mine Errand from the Lord: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Boyd K. Packer [2008], p. 9)

The Doctrine of Premortality has been Revealed only in a Limited Way

Boyd K. Packer Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

Elder Packer has taught that what the Lord has revealed concerning the doctrine of premortality has been done only in . . .

a Limited Way

While our knowledge is limited on our premortal state, we do know . . . (Mine Errand from the Lord: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Boyd K. Packer [2008], p 8; emphasis added)

an Outline Form

No more profound truth has been conveyed to us in the Restoration than the knowledge of our premortal existence. No other church knows or teaches this truth. The doctrine is give only in outline form, but salient facts are repeated often enough in the revelations to assure us of certain fundamental truths. (Mine Errand from the Lord: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Boyd K. Packer [2008], pp 7-8; emphasis added)

There is a Boundless Infinity of Space and Self-Existing Elements

Parley P. Pratt (1807-57) Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

[The following are self-evident and incontrovertible facts—]

First. There has always existed a boundless infinity of space.
Second. Intermingled with this space there exist all the varieties of the elements, properties, or things of which intelligence takes cognizance; which elements or things taken altogether compose what is called Universe.
Third. The elements of all these properties or things are eternal, uncreated, self-existing. Not one particle can be added to them by creative power. Neither can one particle be diminished or annihilated.
Fourth. These eternal, self-existing elements possess in themselves certain inherent properties or attributes, in a greater or less degree; or, in other words, they possess intelligence, adapted to their several spheres. (The Essential Parley P. Pratt [1990], p. 193)

(Unorganized) Intelligence Was Not Created by God but Has Always Coexisted With Him

Harold B. Lee (1899-1973) President

This life we speak of did not begin with mortal birth. This life does not end with mortal death. There is something that is not created or made. The Scriptures called it “intelligence,” which at a certain stage in the pre-existence was organized into a “spirit.” After that spirit had grown to a certain stature it then was given the opportunity by an all-wise Father to come into another stage for its development. It was added upon [with a mortal body], and after having lived its span and having attained to its purpose in mortality, another change took place [death and eventually resurrection]. We go, not into another life in fact, but into another stage of the same life. There is something which was not created or made, and something which does not die, and that something shall live on forever. (Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Harold B. Lee [2006], p. 9; emphasis added)

D. & C. 93:29, 33-34

Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created nor made, neither indeed can be . . . For man is spirit. The elements are eternal.

First Presidency Statement (Joseph F. Smith, President)
The scriptures plainly and repeatedly affirm that God is the Creator of the earth and the heavens and all things that in them are. In the sense so expressed the Creator is an Organizer. God created the earth as an organized sphere; but He certainly did not create, in the sense of bringing into primal existence, the ultimate elements of the materials of which the earth consists, for “the elements are eternal” (Doc. & Cov. 93:33).

So also life is eternal, and not created; but life, or the vital force, may be infused into organized matter, though the details of the process have not been revealed unto man. For illustrative instances see Genesis 2:7; Moses 3:7; and Abraham 5:7. Each of these scriptures states that God breathed into the body of man the breath of life. See further Moses 3:19, for the statement that God breathed the breath of life into the bodies of the beasts and birds. God showed unto Abraham “the intelligences that were organized before the world was”; and by “intelligences” we are to understand personal “spirits” (Abraham 3:22, 23); nevertheless, we are expressly told that “Intelligence” that is, “the light of truth was not created or made, neither indeed can be” (Doc. & Cov. 93:29). “(The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by The First Presidency and the Twelve” in Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 6 vols. comp. by James R. Clark [1966-75], 5:26; emphasis added)

Joseph Fielding Smith (1876-1972) President

We know, however, that there is something called intelligence which always existed. It is the real eternal part of man, which was not created or made. This intelligence combined with the spirit constitutes a spiritual identity or individual.

The spirit of man, then, is a combination of the intelligence and the spirit which is an entity begotten of God. (The Progress of Man [1936], pp. 11-12)

A Core Concept of the Gospel:

God, the Father, Instituted Laws so that Intelligences Could Become Like Himself

Joseph Smith (1805-44) President

I wish to go back to the beginning—to the morn of creation. There is the starting point for us to look to, in order to understand and be fully acquainted with the mind, purposes and decrees of the Great Elohim . . .

God himself, finding he was in the midst of spirits and glory [i.e., intelligences], because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself. The relationship we have with God places us in a situation to advance in knowledge. He has power to institute laws to instruct the weaker intelligences, that they may be exalted with himself, so that they might have one glory upon another, and all that knowledge, power, glory, and intelligence, which is requisite in order to save them in the world of spirits. (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith. [1976], pp. 343, 354; emphasis added)

Joseph B. Wirthlin (1917-2008) Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

I wish to review with you a few core principles of the gospel into which our spiritual roots should sink deeply. Most important is the reality of our Heavenly Father; his Son, Jesus Christ; and the Holy Ghost.

Our Heavenly Father is the father of our spirits and of the entire human race; we are his offspring, his sons and daughters. We have inherited divine characteristics
from him. Because of his love for his children, he provided a plan for us to progress and reach our highest potential and return to his presence. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, "God himself, finding he was in the midst of spirits and glory, because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself." (Deep Roots, Ensign, Nov. 1994, p.75; emphasis added)

The Organization of Individual Spirits

Abraham 3:22
Now the Lord had shown unto me, Abraham, the intelligences that were organized before the world was ... (emphasis added)

First Presidency Statement (Joseph F. Smith, president)
God showed unto Abraham "the intelligences that were organized before the world was", and by "intelligences" we are to understand personal "spirits" (Abraham 3:22, 23) ("The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by The First Presidency and the Twelve" in Messages of the First Presidency, 6 vols. comp. By James R. Clark [1965-75], 5:26; emphasis added)

Brigham Young (1801-1877) President
The life that is within us is a part of an eternity of life, and is organized spirit, which is clothed upon by tabernacles, whereby constituting our present being, which is designed for the attainment of further intelligence. The matter composing our bodies and spirits has been organized from the eternity of matter that fills immensity. (Discourses of Brigham Young, sel. John A. Widtsoe [1941], p.49; emphasis added)

Harold B. Lee (1889-1973) President
A spirit, Abraham says, is an organized intelligence. (The Teachings of Harold B. Lee, ed. by Clyde J. Williams [1986], p.28; emphasis added)

Bruce R. McConkie (1915-85) Quorum of the Twelve Apostles
Abraham used the name intelligences to apply to the spirit children of the Eternal Father. The intelligence or spirit element became intelligences after the spirits were born as individual entities. (Abra. 3:22-24.) Use of this name designates both the organized spirit and attributes of our Heavenly Father. (Mormon Doctrine, 2nd Ed. [1966], p. 387)

Spirits are the Offspring of God

Bruce R. McConkie (1915-85) Quorum of the Twelve Apostles
The Father of us all takes of the self-existing spirit element and creates spirit children, or in other words, he organizes spirits or souls from the intelligence that exists; and such spirit beings become "the intelligences that were organized before the world was." (Abr. 3:22.) They are the sons and daughters of God; creation has commenced; the eternal family of the Eternal God has its beginning. (The Millennial Messiah: The Second Coming of the Son of Man [1982], p.11)

Marion G. Romney (1897-1988) First Presidency
In origin, man is a son of God. The spirits of men "are begotten sons and daughters unto God" (D&C 76:24). Through that birth process, self-existing intelligence was organized into individual spirit beings. (‘The Worth of Souls,’ Ensign, Nov. 1978, p.14)

Acts 17:24, 26, 28-29
24 God that made the world and all things therein ...
26 And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; ...
28 For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.
29 Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device. (emphasis added)

Hebrews 12:9
Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? (emphasis added)

Spirits are Offspring of Both a Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother

Dallin H. Oaks Quorum of the Twelve Apostles
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. (‘Apostasy and Restoration,’ Ensign, May 1995, p.84; emphasis added)

First Presidency (Joseph F. Smith, President) - 1909
All men and women are in the similitude of the universal Father and Mother, and are literally the sons and daughters of Deity ...

The doctrine of the pre-existence, revealed so plainly, particularly in latter days, pours a wonderful flood of light upon the otherwise mysterious problem of man’s origin. It shows that man, as a spirit, was begotten and born of heavenly parents, and reared to maturity in the eternal mansions of the Father, prior to coming upon the earth in a temporal body to undergo an experience in mortality. ... Man is the child of God, formed in the divine image and endowed with divine attributes, and even as the infant of an earthly father and mother is capable in due time of becoming a man, so the undeveloped offspring of celestial parentage is capable, by experience through ages and aeons, of evolving into a God. (‘Origin of Man, November 1909’ Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 6 vols. comp. James R. Clark, comp., [1965-75], 4:203-6; emphasis added)."

The Family: A Proclamation to the World (First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles) - 1995
All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose. (Ensign, Nov. 1995, p. 101)

Spirit Birth Endows Each Organized Intelligence

With Divine Potential

First Presidency Statement (Joseph F. Smith-President)
Man is the child of God, formed in the divine image and endowed with divine attributes, and even as the infant son of an earthly father and mother is capable in due time of becoming a man, so the undeveloped offspring of celestial parentage is capable, by experience through ages and aeons, of evolving into a God. (‘Origin of Man,’ Messages of the First Presidency [1971], Vol.4, pp.205-206; emphasis added)

Lorenzo Snow (1814-1901) President
We were born in the image of God our Father; He begot us like unto Himself. There is the nature of deity in the composition of our spiritual organization; in our spiritual birth our Father transmitted to us the capabilities, powers and faculties which He Himself possesses—as much so as the child on its mother’s bosom possesses, although in an undeveloped state, the faculties, powers, and susceptibilities of its parent. (Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Lorenzo Snow [2012], p.84; emphasis added)

Ezra Taft Benson (1899-1994) President
As God’s offspring, we have His attributes in us. We are gods in embryo, and thus have an unlimited potential for progress and attainment. (Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson [1998], p.21; emphasis added)

M. Russell Ballard Quorum of the Twelve Apostles
Before the world was created, we all lived as the spirit children of our Heavenly Father. Through a natural process of inheritance we received in embryo the traits and attributes of our Heavenly Father. We are His spirit children. Some of what our Eternal Father is, we have inherited. What he has become we may become. (Our Search for Happiness [1993], p.79; emphasis added)

The Purpose of the Gospel is to Fully Develop the Divine Potential of Man

George Q. Cannon (1827-1901) First Presidency
We are the children of God, and as His children there is no attribute we ascribe to Him that we do not possess, though they may be dormant or in embryo. The mission of the Gospel is to develop these powers and make us like our Heavenly Parent. I know this is true, and such knowledge makes me feel happy. (Gospel Truth,
Gordon B. Hinckley (1910-2008) President

The whole design of the gospel is to lead us, onward and upward to greater achievement, even, eventually, to godhood. This great possibility was enunciated by the Prophet Joseph Smith in the King Follet sermon (see Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, pp. 342-62) and emphasized by President Lorenzo Snow. It is a grand and incomparable concept: As God now is, man may become! (Deseret News, November 1994, p. 48; also Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley [1997], p. 179).

Spirits Had Extensive Period of Growth and Development

Howard W. Hunter (1907-1995) President

While on earth, we are dual beings comprised of a physical body and a spirit. Our bodies are of recent origin and come to us from mortal elements. Our spirits were begotten by God and have had an extensive period of growth and development in the spirit world, where we came to know God and to comprehend the nature of spiritual realities. (The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter [1997], p. 12; emphasis added)

Bruce R. McConkie (1915-1985) Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

• Further, all men, and the servants of the Lord in particular, acquired, in preexistence, by obedience to law, the specific talents and capacities with which they are endowed in this life. Men are not born equal; they come into mortality endowed with the abilities earned and developed in a long period of premortal schooling. And a just and equitable Being, who deals fairly and impartially with all his children, expects each of them to use the talents and abilities with which they are endowed and the gifts that are given them by a divine Providence. (The Mortal Messiah, 4 vols. [1981], 3:470)

• We were born as spirits, and we dwelt in the presence of our Eternal Parents; we lived before our mortal birth. As spirits we were in all respects as we are now save only that we were not housed in mortal bodies as is the present circumstance.

In his infinite wisdom and goodness, the Eternal Father ordained laws by obedience to which his spirit children could advance and progress and eventually obtain the high reward of eternal life.

An all-wise Father endowed his spirit children with agency—the freedom and ability to choose good or evil—while they yet dwelt in his presence.

Being subject to law, and having their agency, all the spirits of men, while yet in the Eternal Presence, developed aptitudes, talents, capacities, and abilities of every sort, kind, and degree. During the long expanse of life which then was, an infinite variety of talents and abilities came into being. As the ages rolled, no two spirits remained alike. Mozart became a musician; Einstein centered his interest in mathematics; Michelangelo turned his attention to painting. Cain, was a liar, a schemer, a rebel who maintained a close affinity to Lucifer. Abraham and Moses and all of the prophets sought and obtained the talent for spirituality. Mary and Eve were two of the greatest of all the spirit daughters of the Father. The whole house of Israel, known and segregated out from their fellows, was inclined toward spiritual things. And so it went through all the hosts of heaven, each individual developing such talents and abilities as his soul desired. (The Mortal Messiah, 4 vols. [1981], 1:21-23)

Use of Individual Agency Led to Inequality and Division of Spirits

Abraham 3:22

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.

Joseph Fielding Smith (1876-1972) President

The spirits of men had their free agency, some were greater than others, and from among them the Father called and foreordained his prophets and rulers. Jeremiah and Abraham were two of them. . . . The spirits of men were not equal. They may have had an equal start, and we know they were all innocent in the beginning; but the right of free agency which was given to them enabled some to outstrip others, and thus, through the eons of immortal existence, to become more intelligent, more faithful, for they were free to act for themselves, to receive the truth or rebel against it. (Doctrines of Salvation, 3 vols. sel. Bruce R. McConkie [1954-56], 1:59)

Harold B. Lee (1899-1973) President

• In the spirit world there were some who were valiant—more valiant than others—in choosing to do good, and thus they became the noble and great ones of whom the Lord said, “These I will make my rulers” (Abraham 3:23), and so in this earth, coming through a chosen lineage, those noble and great ones are expected, as members of the Church and kingdom of God in every age, to be rulers of the world of sin and wickedness. (Conference Report, October 1945, p.48)

• Between the extremes of the “noble and the great” spirits, whom God would make His rulers (see Abraham 3:22-23), and the disobedient and the rebellious, who were cast out with Satan, there were obviously many spirits with varying degrees of faithfulness. (The Teachings of Harold B. Lee [1986], p. 23)

John A. Widtsoe (1872-1952) Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

The beings in the “spirit world”—whence humanity comes—are alike in that they possess the right of free agency; they are unlike in that they do not choose, nor have they chosen, alike. Consequently, the inhabitants of the spirit world, as in our world, with the same beginnings and opportunities, differ in the degree or stage of their development. There is therefore in the spirit world as on earth a gradation among individuals in knowledge and power from the lowest to the highest, from the lead advanced to the God who represents all knowledge, power, and good. Those who lag behind in the march towards progression are not necessarily evil. They are chiefly enemies to themselves as they loiter along the highway of eternity, though they do hinder the purposes of the Lord who seeks the ultimate salvation of all His children.

The inequality or gradation among those who dwell in the domain of spirits is clearly set forth in the Book of Abraham: (Quotes Abraham 3:19, 22-23) (Evidences and Reconciliations [1960], p. 208)

A Special Lineage—The House of Israel—Was Elect

In the Premortal World

“Election” (LDS Bible Dictionary)

A theological term primarily denoting God’s choice of the house of Israel to be the covenant people with privileges and responsibilities, that they might become a means of blessing to the whole world (Rom. 9:11; 11:5, 7, 28). Election is an opportunity for service and is both on a national and an individual basis. On a national basis the seed of Abraham carry the gospel to the world. But it is by individual faithfulness that it is done.

The elect are chosen even “before the foundation of the world,” yet no one is unconditionally elected to eternal life. Each must, for himself, hearken to the gospel and receive its ordinances and covenants from the hands of the servants of the Lord in order to obtain salvation. If one is elected but does not serve, his election could be said to have been in vain, as Paul expressed in 2 Cor. 6:1.

We see that elections are not all of the same kind. Since election has to do with God’s choice of persons or groups to accomplish His purposes, some may be elected by Him to one thing and some to another. Although the Lord uses certain individuals to accomplish His purposes, it does not necessarily follow that these persons will automatically receive a fulness of salvation thereby. For instance, Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus fulfilled certain purposes in the economy of God, but they apparently did it for their own reasons and not as conscious acts of faith and righteousness. On the other hand, salvation of one’s soul comes only by personal integrity and willing obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus there are some elections to be desired over others. An “election of grace” spoken of in D&C 84:98—102 and Rom. 11:1—5 has reference to one’s situation in mortality; that is, being born at a time, at a place, and in circumstances where one will come in favorable contact with the gospel. This election took place in the premortal existence. Those who are faithful and diligent in the gospel in mortality receive an even more desirable election in this life and become the elect of God. These receive the promise of a fulness of God’s glory in eternity (D&C 84:33—41).
Now then, to make a summary of what I have just read, may I ask each of you, Mr. Old B. Lee, to respect, to consider the merits of our conduct before we came here? We have received here in this earth [life] was given to each of us according to the condition in which we lived in that premortal spirit world. Some may question these assumptions, but during our lives here in mortality, isn’t it just as reasonable to believe that what one of us will be judged when we leave this earth according to his or her deeds, as is true in the world’s history, as the Apostle Paul taught the men of Athens and as the Lord revealed to Moses, determined by the faithfulness of each of those who lived before this world was created.

Now, don’t misunderstand as to just what may be a great privilege or opportunity. Sometimes to be born through the channels of adversity is to have had the greatest opportunity. Just because we haven’t been born rich, for instance, may be the greatest blessing we could possibly have. Perhaps some spiritual infirmities might be a blessing. (The Teachings of Harold B. Lee [1996], p. 23)

Now then, to make a summary of what I have just read, may I ask each of you again the question, “Who are you?” You are all the sons and daughters of God. Your spirits were created and lived as organized intelligences before the world was. You have been blessed to have a physical body because of your obedience to certain commandments in that premortal state. You are now born into a family to which you have come, into the nations through which you have come, as a reward for the kind of lives you lived before you came here and at a time in the world’s history, as the Apostle Paul taught the men of Athens and as the Lord revealed to Moses, determined by the faithfulness of each of those who lived before this world was created.

Hear now the significant words of that powerful sermon to “The Unknown God” preached by the apostle Paul, to those who were ignorantly worshipping images of stone and brass and wood, and I quote: “God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; and hath made one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth [now mark you this], and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us.” (Acts 17.24, 26-27) Here then again we have the Lord making a further enlightening declaration to Moses as recorded in the Book of Deuteronomy:

“When the most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel.” (Deut. 32:8)

Now, mind you, this was said to the children of Israel before they had arrived in the “Promised Land,” which was to be the land of their inheritance. Then note this next verse: “For the Lord’s portion is his people, Jacob is the lot of his inheritance.” (Deut. 32:9)

It would seem very clear, then, that those born to the lineage of Jacob, who was later to be called Israel, and his posterity, who were known as the children of Israel, were born into the most illustrious lineage of any of those who came upon the earth as mortal beings.

All these rewards were seemingly promised, or foreordained, before the world was. Surely these matters must have been determined by the kind of lives we had lived in that premortal spirit world. Some may question these assumptions, but at the same time they will accept without any question the belief that each one of us will be judged when we leave this earth according to his or her deeds during our lives here in mortality. Isn’t it just as reasonable to believe that what we have received here in this earth [life] was given to each of us according to the merits of our conduct before we came here? (“Understanding Who You Are Brings Self-Respect,” Ensign, January 1974, pp. 4-5)