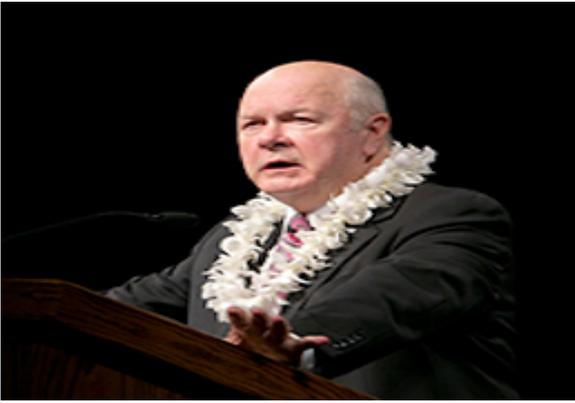


Joseph Smith and Christ's Eternal Gospel



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The Choice Seer Joseph Smith taught us that God our Father has a plan for his children, a program established to maximize our growth and insure our happiness. And yet that fact alone—that there is some divine plan to life—is not as obvious from the Bible as from latter-day scripture. Knowing what we know, we are able to recognize divine design, but seldom can we turn to a specific Old or New Testament passage that speaks with clarity of a plan. How very different is the Book of Mormon! The Nephite prophets speak with grateful hearts for the merciful plan of the great Creator, the plan of our God, the great plan of mercy, the plan of redemption, the eternal plan of deliverance, the plan of salvation, and the great plan of happiness ([2 Nephi 9:6,13](#); [11:5](#), [Jacob 6:8](#); [Jarom 1:2](#); [Alma 12:25-26,30,32](#); [17:16](#); [18:39](#); [22:13-14](#); [24:14](#); [29:2](#); [34:31](#); [39:18](#); [42:5,8,11,13,15,16,31](#)). We know that the plan of salvation is “always and everlastingly the same; that obedience to the same laws always brings the same reward; that the gospel laws have not changed...; and that always and everlastingly all things pertaining to salvation center in Christ.”¹

An Eternal Atonement

Jesus is truly the “Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” ([Revelation 13:8](#); [Moses 7:47](#)). That is, the atoning sacrifice is not only timely (for those of us who regularly need its cleansing powers) but *timeless*. Though the act of atonement would not take place until Jesus suffered in Gethsemane and on Golgotha in the meridian of time, earth’s earliest inhabitants were taught to call upon God in the name of his Beloved Son for deliverance ([Moses 5:5-8](#)). Again, this central truth is not to be had in Christendom. Indeed, one of the fascinating attacks on the Book of Mormon is that it is too Christ-centered! That is, critics contend, the Book of Mormon has too much Christ within it, long before there was a Christ.

The Prophet Joseph declared that God has revealed himself, his plan, and the Mediator of his sacred covenant to men and women from the beginning. The voice of the Father came to Adam: “If thou wilt turn unto me, and hearken unto my voice, and believe, and repent of all thy transgressions, and be baptized, even in water, in the name of mine Only Begotten Son..., which is Jesus Christ, the only name which shall be given under heaven, whereby salvation shall come unto the children of men, ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost” ([Moses 6:52](#)). Further, Adam was commanded to teach his children that all men and women, because of the effects of the Fall, “must be born again into the kingdom of heaven, of water, and of the Spirit, and be cleansed by blood, even the blood of mine Only Begotten; that ye might be sanctified from all sin, and enjoy the words of eternal life in this world, and eternal life in the world to come, even immortal glory” ([Moses 6:59](#)).

The Prophet observed that “we cannot believe that the ancients in all ages were so ignorant of the system of heaven as many suppose, since all that were ever saved, were saved through the power of this great plan of redemption, as much before the coming of Christ as since; if not, God has had different plans in operation (if we may so express it), to bring men back to dwell with Himself; and this we cannot believe, since there has been no change in the constitution of man since he fell.”² And so it is that we learn through the scriptures of the Restoration that, in addition to Adam, such prophetic personalities from the Bible as Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Moses had revealed unto them the particulars of the Father’s plan and knew and taught of the coming redemption in Jesus Christ ([Moses 7, 8](#), JST, Genesis 15:9-12, [Moses 1](#)). Truly, as the Apostle Peter proclaimed, “To [Christ] give all the prophets witness” ([Acts 10:43](#)).

It was no different in the western hemisphere. Lehi and his family brought the fulness of the gospel with them, including the holy priesthood, the knowledge of salvation, and the intercessory role of Jesus the Christ. Very early in the Book of Mormon account Nephi stated that “six hundred years from the time my father left Jerusalem, a prophet would the Lord God raise up among the Jews—even a Messiah, or, in other words, a Savior of the world” ([1 Nephi 10:4](#)). Nephi saw in vision that Jesus would be “lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world” ([1 Nephi 11:33](#)). Almost six hundred years before the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, Lehi taught his son Jacob that “redemption cometh in and through the Holy Messiah; for he is full of grace and truth.” Further, he explained, “there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah, who layeth down his life according to the flesh, and taketh it again by the power of the Spirit, that he may bring to pass the resurrection of the dead, being the first that should rise” ([2 Nephi 2:6, 8](#)). Alma taught an erring son that because the souls of men and women who live before the meridian of time are just as precious in the sight of God as those who live during or after that age, it is necessary that redemption in Christ should be made available to people of all ages ([Alma 39:17-19](#)). Indeed, “none of the prophets have written, or prophesied, save they have spoken concerning this Christ” ([Jacob 7:11](#); compare [4:4](#); [Mosiah 13:33](#)).

Eternal Covenants and Ordinances

Because we know that the great plan of happiness is eternal and that salvation in any age is accomplished only in and through the mediation of the Redeemer, we also know that the covenants and ordinances are likewise eternal and unchanging. “Now taking it for granted that the scriptures say what they mean and mean what they say,” the Prophet Joseph noted, “we have sufficient grounds to go on and prove from the Bible that the gospel has always been the same; the ordinances to fulfill its requirements, the same, and the officers to officiate, the same; and the signs and fruits resulting from the promises, the same.” He continued with an illustration of this principle: “Therefore, as Noah was a preacher of righteousness he must have been baptized and ordained to the priesthood by the laying on of the hands.”³ In short, the Lord “set the ordinances to be the same forever and ever.”⁴ That is, “Ordinances, instituted in the heavens before the foundation of the world, in the priesthood, for the salvation of men, are not to be altered or changed. All must be saved on the same principles.”⁵

It is in this light that we speak of the restored gospel as comprising the new and everlasting covenant. Modern revelations affirm: “Wherefore, I say unto you that I have sent unto you mine everlasting covenant, even that which was from the beginning” ([D&C 49:9](#)). “Verily I say unto you, blessed are you for receiving mine everlasting covenant, even the fulness of my gospel, sent forth unto the children of men, that they might have life and be made partakers of the glories which are to be revealed in the last days, as it was written by the prophets and apostles in days of old” ([D&C 66:2](#); compare [1:22](#); [39:11](#); [45:9](#); [49:9](#); [133:57](#)). In the words of President Joseph Fielding Smith, “The new and everlasting covenant is the sum total of all gospel covenants and obligations.”⁶ The gospel covenant is *new* in a given time, often following a period of apostasy. It is *everlasting* in the sense that it was had from the beginning.

In that spirit, and knowing what we do about the everlasting nature of the gospel, the Church and kingdom, and

the principles and ordinances pertaining thereto, we know that many of the ancients had the gospel. Many of them knew the Lord, taught his doctrine, and officiated as legal administrators in his earthly kingdom. Isaac, Israel, Joseph, and all the patriarchs enjoyed personal revelation and communion with their Maker. We would suppose that Eve and Sarah and Rebekah were baptized; that Jacob received the temple endowment; that Micah and Malachi stood in the prophetic office by divine call and not because they assumed that role on their own. Surely Nephi, son of Lehi, was baptized by water and received the gift of the Holy Ghost, as well as the high priesthood, although an account of the same is not stated directly in the Nephite record. That the blessings of the holy temple were available to the Former-day Saints is made clear in the Prophet's translation of the Egyptian papyri. We are told that one particular figure represents "the grand Key-words of the Holy Priesthood, as revealed to Adam, in the Garden of Eden, as also to Seth, Noah, Melchizedek, Abraham, and all to whom the Priesthood was revealed" (Explanation of Figure 3 in Facsimile #2). Because of what has been made known through Joseph Smith—principles of doctrine and priesthood government—we know what it takes to operate the kingdom of God and what things the people of God must do to comply.

Our Father Loves All His Children

Several years ago on a Sabbath day I sat with an associate in his beautiful cathedral and listened as the priest spoke of the body and blood of Jesus. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed tears making their way down the cheeks of my friend. My mind ambled back over the years of our association, and memory impressed upon me the reality of my friend's commitment to his faith, his goodness as a human being, and his genuine, heartfelt desire to be true to what he understood. There came over me the quiet but compelling realization that the Almighty loved this man as much as he loved me; that he was a child of God, just as I was; and that the Lord would do all that was possible to maximize this man's opportunities and insure his ultimate happiness.

That was an important moment in my life. I grew up with a testimony. It has not been difficult for me to believe. Though I was reared in a part of the country where there were few members of the Church around me, I somehow sensed deep in my bones that what we are about in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is true, is right, and is meant for the blessing of the entire world. On that particular occasion, however, as we sat reverently in a place that was somewhat foreign to my spiritual upbringing, there sprouted within me an inner awareness that God loves all men and women of all ages and is no respecter of persons. Oh, I knew then as I know now that this is the only true and living Church and that the Latter-day Saints are the custodians of the fulness of the gospel and the holy priesthood. There was and is no question whatsoever about that. But I seemed to perceive then—and as I grow older I perceive even more clearly—the goodness and mercy and infinite patience of our Heavenly Father toward all his sons and daughters. As Enoch observed: "Thou art there, and thy bosom is there; and also thou art just; thou art merciful and kind forever" ([Moses 7:30](#)).

I had a somewhat similar experience not long after that visit to the cathedral. While sitting in the waiting room at the dentist's office, I picked up a copy of a *Reader's Digest*, only to discover an insert on how to communicate more effectively with family members. It was prepared by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I was aware that the Church had begun placing these brief advertisements in the *Digest* but had never taken the time to do more than peruse them. I read this particular one through. It was nice, had some good pointers on communication, and seemed to be the kind of thing that would leave a positive impression with most readers. My next thought was rather judgmental: "This is quaint, but it really isn't going to bring many people into the Church. Why waste the Church's money on such fluff?"

Then there came a very simple but effective chastisement to my narrow mind. It occurred to me that there just might be someone, somewhere, who would be prompted, after reading the insert, to inquire after the Church and its teachings. More important, maybe someone would be helped by the piece. Maybe some father or mother, some son or daughter, would take counsel and take heart from what was written. Oh, they may not join the Church, but what if the insert actually helped their family, resulted in greater harmony, moved their home a little closer to heaven? Wouldn't that make it all worth it? I sensed a broadening of my views through that experience

and again, an awareness that the God and Father of us all will give unto us line upon line, precept upon precept, according to our ability and willingness to receive.

“All that he seeth fit that they should have”

One only has to wrestle personally with a wandering child or loved one, or feel the pain of someone else who does, to realize that we do not cease to love the straying or the ignorant. And surely He who is the embodiment of love and mercy does not cease to love those of his children who do not enjoy the fulness of gospel blessings in their lives. Our Father in heaven surely will do all that is appropriate during our mortal probation to inspire, lift, edify, and encourage individuals, families, communities, and whole nations. It was to Nephi that the Lord Jehovah spoke on this matter: “Know ye not that there are more nations than one? Know ye not that I, the Lord your God, have created all men, and that I remember those who are upon the isles of the sea; and that I rule in the heavens above and in the earth beneath; and that *I bring forth my word unto the children of men, yea, even upon all the nations of the earth?*... For behold, I shall speak unto the Jews and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the Nephites and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the other tribes of the house of Israel, which I have led away, and they shall write it; *and I shall also speak unto all nations of the earth and they shall write it*” ([2 Nephi 29:7,12](#), emphasis added).

Alma explained that “the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit they should have” ([Alma 29:8](#)). One body of people may be prepared for the fulness of light and knowledge; another body will be prepared only for a glimmer of that ray of truth. God suits his blessings according to the present readiness of the children of men. Elder B. H. Roberts offered the following counsel on this principle: “While the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is established for the instruction of men; and is one of God’s instrumentalities for the making known the truth, yet he is not limited to that institution for such purposes, neither in time nor place. God raises up wise men... of their own tongue and nationality, speaking to them through means that they can comprehend; not always giving a fulness of truth such as may be found in the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ; but always giving that measure of truth that the people are prepared to receive. Mormonism holds, then, that all the great teachers are servants of God, among all nations and in all ages. They are inspired men, appointed to instruct God’s children according to the conditions in the midst of which he finds them.... Wherever God finds a soul sufficiently enlightened and pure, one with whom his Spirit can communicate, lo! he makes of him a teacher of men. While the path of sensuality and darkness may be that which most men tread, a few... have been led along the upward path; a few in all countries and generations have been wisdom seekers, or seekers of God. They have been so because the Divine Word of Wisdom has looked upon them, choosing them for the knowledge and service of himself.”⁷

It is but reasonable, therefore, that elements of truth, pieces of a much larger mosaic, should be found throughout the world in varying cultures and among diverse religious groups. Further, as the world has passed through phases of apostasy and restoration, relics of revealed doctrine remain, albeit in some cases in altered or even convoluted forms. Persons lacking spiritual insight and the faith that derives from a knowledge of Christ’s eternal plan of salvation, may tend to cast doubt on the true gospel; may point to legends and traditions of creation epics or flood stories that presumably predate the Pentateuch; may eagerly note similarities between ordinances of the temple and practices in pagan cultures; and may thereby suggest that Christianity has but copied from the more ancient sources.

President Joseph F. Smith had much to say to those who seek to upstage Christianity. Jesus Christ, he taught, “being the fountain of truth, is no imitator. He taught the truth first; it was his before it was given to man.” Further, “When I read books scattered... through the world, throwing discredit upon words and teachings and doctrines of the Lord Jesus Christ, saying that some of the ideas Jesus uttered, truths that he promulgated, have been enunciated before by the ancient philosophers among the heathen nations of the world, I want to tell you that there is not a heathen philosopher that ever lived in all the world from the beginning, that had a truth or enunciated a principle of God’s truth that did not receive it from the fountain head, from God himself....

“Let it be remembered that Christ was with the Father from the beginning, that the gospel of truth and light existed from the beginning, and is from everlasting to everlasting. The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, as one God, are the fountain of truth.... If we find truth in broken fragments through the ages, it may be set down as an incontrovertible fact that it originated at the fountain, and was given to philosophers, inventors, patriots, reformers, and prophets by the inspiration of God. It came from him through his Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost, in the first place, and from no other source. It is eternal.

“... Men are mere repeaters of what he has taught them. He has voiced no thought originating with man. The teachings of Jesus did not begin with his incarnation; for, like truth, he is eternal. He not only inspired the ancients, from the beginning, but when he came to earth he reiterated eternal, original truth, and added gloriously to the revelations men had uttered. When he returned to the Father, he still took, and does take, an interest in his children and people, by revealing to them new truths, any by inspiring their actions; and, as men grow in the knowledge of God, they shall become more and more like him unto the perfect day, when his knowledge shall cover the earth as the waters cover the deep.”⁸

Remnants of the Faith

Knowing what we know concerning God our Father—that he is a personal being; that he has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as our own; that he is an exalted and gloried being; and knowing that this knowledge was had by many of the ancients—should we be surprised to find legends and myths concerning gods who have divine power but human attributes and passions? Knowing that Adam and Seth and Enos and Cainan and Mahalaleel and others of the antediluvians spoke of the coming of the Messiah, and that the Messiah would come to earth as a man but be possessed of the powers of a God, is it not likely that they also knew that he would be born of a virgin? Should we be surprised to find pagan traditions of virgin births and divine humans?

Adam heard the divine voice saying: “I am God; I made the world, and *men before they were in the flesh*” ([Moses 6:51](#)). That is, men and women in the earliest ages knew of a first estate, a premortal existence. Therefore, is it any wonder that several religious traditions are wedded to an idea of past lives? Inasmuch as the doctrines of rebirth, regeneration, resurrection, and the immortality of the soul were taught to Adam and his posterity, why should we flinch when we discover the misshapen doctrines of reincarnation, transmigration of souls, and rebirth in such traditions as Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism, or when we encounter a people like the ancient Egyptians who are obsessed not with death (as some suppose), but with life after death?

Of particular interest to Latter-day Saints is the resemblance between what goes on in our own temples and things that transpire in sacred structures of other faiths. In many cases those resemblances may originate with earnest truth seekers who act without authority, even as did Pharaoh, great-grandson of Noah. Pharaoh, “being a righteous man, established his kingdom and judged his people wisely and justly all his days, seeking earnestly to imitate that order established by the fathers in the first generations, in the days of the first patriarchal reign, even in the reign of Adam, and also of Noah, his father” ([Abraham 1:26-27](#).)

Hugh Nibley spent a lifetime studying such parallels. He wrote: “Latter-day Saints believe that their temple ordinances are as old as the human race and represent a primordial revealed religion that has passed through alternate phases of apostasy and restoration which have left the world littered with the scattered fragments of the

original structure, some more and some less recognizable, but all badly damaged and out of proper context....

“... There are countless parallels, many of them very instructive, among the customs and religions of mankind, to what the Mormons do. But there is a world of difference between Ginzberg’s *Legends of the Jews* and the book of Isaiah, or between the Infancy Gospels and the real Gospels, no matter how many points of contact one may detect between them. The LDS endowment was not built up of elements brought together by chance, custom, or long research; it is a single, perfectly consistent organic whole, conveying its message without the aid of rationalizing, spiritualizing, allegorizing, or moralizing interpretations.

“But what about the Egyptian rites? What are they to us? They are a parody, an imitation, but as such not to be despised. For all the great age and consistency of their rites and teachings, which certainly command respect, the Egyptians did not have the real thing, and they knew it....

“The Mormon endowment... is frankly a model, a presentation in figurative terms. As such it is flexible and adjustable; for example, it may be presented in more languages than one and in more than one medium of communication. But since it does not attempt to be a picture of reality, but only a model or analog to show how things work, setting forth the pattern of man’s life on earth with its fundamental whys and wherefores, it does not need to be changed or adapted greatly through the years; it is a remarkably stable model, which makes its comparison with other forms and traditions, including the more ancient ones, quite valid and instructive.”⁹

And what is true of sacred practices and beliefs throughout the ancient non-Christian world is also true in today’s modern Christian world. We know that divine priesthood authority was taken away by God and that many plain and precious truths were lost or kept back following the deaths of the meridian apostles. We know that God began the restoration of truths and powers through Joseph Smith and will continue to do so into and through the Millennium. But because Protestants or Catholics do not possess the authority to act in the name of God does not mean they have no truth or that any scriptural interpretation from them is automatically incorrect or corrupt. As noted earlier, elements of enlightenment, remnants of truth, and aspects of the faith of the Former-day Saints may be found in modern Christianity. The Lord loves his children, all of them, and he delights to “honor those who serve [him] in righteousness and in truth unto the end” ([D&C 76:5](#)).

C. S. Lewis once stated that there are people “who are slowly becoming Christians though they do not yet call themselves so. There are people who do not accept the full Christian doctrine about Christ but who are so strongly attracted by Him that they are His in a much deeper sense than they themselves understand.” Lewis went on to speak of people “who are being led by God’s secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity, and who thus belong to Christ without knowing it.”¹⁰

Conclusion

There are good people in the world, men and women who love God, who are earnestly striving to be true to the standards of decency and integrity they have been taught. Indeed, everyone has access to some measure of light and truth from the Almighty. President Brigham Young thus declared that there has never been “a man or woman upon the face of the earth, from the days of Adam to this day, who has not been enlightened, instructed, and taught by the revelations of Jesus Christ.”¹¹ The prophets teach that if people will be true to the light within them—the Light of Christ—they will be led to the higher light of the Holy Ghost found in the covenant gospel, either in this life or in the life to come. “And the Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world; and the Spirit enlighteneth every man through the world, that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit.”¹²

In fact, is it not possible that one reason so many parallels and resemblances exist between the fulness of the gospel and the various approximations of the full truth is because men and women are responding to those “spirit memories” of the past, those things we once knew but now seem just out of conscious awareness? “All those salient truths,” President Joseph F. Smith observed, “which come home so forcibly to the head and heart seem but the awakening of the memories of the spirit. Can we know anything here that we did not know before

we came?”¹³ Is this not why so many who join the Church recognize in the teachings of the missionaries things they feel they have always known, things, interestingly enough, that are not necessarily to be found in their former religious profession? We generally refer to those who come into the Church as *converts*, implying that they turned from another belief to embrace the testimony of the Restoration. While that certainly happens, in many instances those who are baptized tell us, essentially: “Everything the missionaries told me I already believed!” In fact, that which we call a conversion is very often the *awakening* of a distant memory, an echo from the past. “People ask me why I left my old church,” the convert says. “I tell them it was not a matter of leaving my old church so much as it was a matter of coming home.”

And so, in summary: Joseph Smith revealed that Christ’s gospel is eternal. It was delivered to earth’s inhabitants in the beginning. It has been preached through the ages by Christian prophets who knew their Lord and sought to be true to divine covenants and ordinances. In The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints we attend to sacred matters, matters that are ancient and eternal, matters that were discussed and foreordained from before the foundations of the world, matters that will prepare this earth to abide the coming of the King of kings. What the Latter-day Saints believe is what the Former-day Saints believed. The covenants we make and the ordinances we perform thereby link us to the past and point us to a glorious future. God loves all men and women and is eager to enlighten them in whatever ways he can. We rejoice in our Father and God, and we rejoice in the knowledge that we are all part of His royal family. Like Nephi of old, we glory in our Jesus, for he has redeemed our souls from hell ([2 Nephi 33:6](#)).

1 Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 4-5.

2 *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 59-60; see *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols., ed.

B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 2:16-17.

3 *Teachings*, 264; *Times and Seasons*, 6 vols. (Nauvoo, IL: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1839-46), 3:904.

4 *Teachings*, 168; *History of the Church* 4:208.5 *Teachings*, 308; *History of the Church* 5:423.

6 *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3 vols., comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954-56), 1:156.

7 *Defense of the Faith and the Saints*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1907), 1:512-13. 8 *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 31, 395, 398-400; see also *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards & Sons, 1851-86), 15:325.

9 *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), xii-xiii.

10 *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 178.

11 *Journal of Discourses* 2:139.

12 See D&C 84:46-48; Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 67-68; Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 260-61.

13 *Gospel Doctrine*, 13.