

STATEMENT DM807-2

Pinning Down Mormon Doctrine**By Bill McKeever and Eric Johnson**

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Part Two

In our previous installment on how Latter-day Saints (LDS) ascertain doctrine, we examined the supremacy of the teachings of the living prophets over the LDS standard works. Throughout the history of their church, LDS leaders have maintained God will never allow church prophets to lead their members astray. In the words of President Ezra Taft Benson, “Only one man stands as the Lord’s spokesman to the Church and the world, and he is the President of the Church. The words of all other men should be weighed against his inspired words. Though His prophet is mortal, God will not let him lead His Church astray.”¹

Benson also taught that Mormons should not pit dead prophets against the current living prophet; yet, if, as Benson maintained, “eternal laws exist universally” and “fundamental principles and values never change,”² why have LDS prophets decided to change them? Why is Mormon history replete with examples of LDS prophets contradicting each other?

Such questions should not offend Latter-day Saints, since one of their own general authorities, George A. Smith, offered a similar challenge on 13 August 1871: “If a faith will not bear to be investigated; if its preachers and professors are afraid to have it examined, their foundation must be very weak.”³ Few Mormons doubt Mormonism’s ability to hold up under serious cross-examination.

Brigham Young: Never Wrong? Nevertheless, a Mormon who takes an honest look at the teachings of his or her leaders, both past and present, will quickly see how LDS prophets are, in fact, quite capable of leading members “astray.” A classic example of this is found in the teachings of Brigham Young. To this day, no LDS president has held the presidency for a longer period of time, and probably none introduced more controversial teachings than Young.

Four years before he died, Young challenged his audience to give proof that he had ever given incorrect counsel: “If there is an Elder here, or any member of this Church... who can bring up the first idea, the first sentence that I have delivered to the people as counsel that is wrong, I really wish they would do it; but they cannot do it, for the simple reason that I have never given counsel that is wrong; this is the reason.”⁴

Mormons may be surprised to know that even some LDS leaders have exposed Young’s errant counsel. Though coming short of denouncing him as a false prophet, many Mormons have engaged in the same sort of spin we expect in political controversies. One of these has to do with Young’s teaching that Adam was God and “the only God with whom we have to do.”⁵

Should this subject come up, your Mormon friend might respond by saying this was merely Brigham’s “theory.” Since it was never canonized, it need not be taken seriously. Young, however, did not categorize this teaching as mere speculation. Contrary to common LDS opinion, Young emphatically identified this principle as a serious doctrine. Speaking at a conference on 9 April 1852, he closed his comments on this subject with the following warning: “Now, let all who may hear these doctrines, pause before they make light of them or treat them with indifference, for they will prove their salvation or damnation.”⁶

To insist that this teaching is not a part of the LDS canon is also questionable, since in the *Doctrine and Covenants* Adam is described as the “Ancient of Days,” a term whose biblical and historical usage has been reserved for Almighty God.⁷ It appears that Young took this reference to its logical, albeit erroneous, conclusion.

Ample evidence demonstrates that Young’s message regarding Adam misled others. Heber C. Kimball, Young’s first counselor, taught: “I have learned by experience that there is but one God that pertains to this people, and He is the God that pertains to this earth — the first man. That first man sent his own Son to redeem the world, to redeem his brethren; his life was taken, his blood shed, that our sins might be remitted.”⁸

Kimball’s grandson, President Spencer W. Kimball, claimed that the Adam-God “theory” was only “alleged” to have been taught by some of the general authorities. In his October 1978 conference remarks, Kimball cautioned his listeners against “this and other kinds of false *doctrine*” (emphasis added).⁹ To claim this teaching was only alleged to have been taught is in and of itself misleading.

Young also believed that just as humans who achieve godhood would continually progress in knowledge, so too does the Mormon God.¹⁰ Fourth LDS President Wilford Woodruff concurred: “God Himself is increasing and progressing in knowledge, power, and dominion, and will do so, worlds without end. It is just so with us.”¹¹

Tenth LDS President Joseph Fielding Smith, Jr., strongly disagreed with his predecessors and asked, “Where has the Lord ever revealed to us that he is lacking in knowledge? That he is still learning new truth; discovering new laws that are unknown to him? I think this kind of doctrine is very dangerous.”¹²

Smith claimed that he did not know where the Lord had ever made such a declaration; however, two LDS presidents, one of whom said his counsel was never wrong, taught this doctrine. Space does not permit the examination of other inconsistencies. It is clear, however, that there is no merit to the idea that LDS prophets are incapable of leading members astray.

The Mormon “Testimony.” Latter-day Saints believe the ability to discern doctrinal truth comes through a “personal testimony,” which is also known as the “burning in the bosom.” Many Mormons believe they are right, based solely on an alleged confirmation by the “Holy Ghost.”¹³ To some this subjective feeling is all they need to tell them that the LDS position is true. This method for determining truth is fraught with serious flaws. At this point, we would like to offer a word of caution should this subject ever arise. Many Christians have made light of this experience, even to the point of mocking it. We would hope that Christians would avoid this temptation and maintain a spirit of gentleness and respect (1 Pet. 3:15–16).

In their rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity, Mormons often insist that the “oneness” in the Godhead merely means that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are “one in purpose.” In light of this, we have found it profitable to ask, “If you believe the members of the Godhead are ‘one in purpose,’ is it possible that the Holy Ghost would ever contradict what the Father or Son has already revealed?” Most Mormons would adamantly agree that this is not possible. This being the case, we must politely show them that what they thought was a divine verification was not the Holy Ghost at all.

For example, it would be erroneous to assume that the Holy Ghost confirmed to the Latter-day Saint that God was the offspring of a previous God and that it was also possible for righteous LDS males to become Gods. Isaiah 43:10 rejects such a concept when it says, “Ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen: that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me”¹⁴ (KJV).

Asking your LDS acquaintances if their feelings have always been 100 percent accurate can sometimes expose the subjectivity of this test for truth. Who has always found his or her feelings to be absolutely reliable? You might remind them that many ex-Mormons have testified that they once felt a divine confirmation regarding the LDS Church, only to find out later that it was not true. The Word of God must support what we believe. If our feelings run counter to this measuring rod for truth, we must, in good conscience, recognize that our feelings are misleading us.

Revelation 22:18–19. In an attempt to place doubt on all LDS extrabiblical teachings, some Christians have felt that quoting Revelation 22:18–19 solves the matter. The passage sternly warns about adding or taking away the words of “this book.” Most evangelical commentators believe John was giving a straightforward warning to the readers about the Book of Revelation, and not the Bible as a whole. Since the Bible had not been compiled at the time of John’s

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writing, it would be wrong to assume that he was speaking about books other than his own. John's warning, therefore, should not be used in any other context.

This does not mean that Christians should be any more inclined to accept the validity of Mormon scriptures. In the Bible, God warns those who pretend to speak for Him when they are not authorized to do so. Moses admonished the Israelites in Deuteronomy 4:2 that they were not to add to, or subtract from, the commands of God. In Proverbs 30:6, we are again warned against adding to God's Word. Such a presumptuous act was worthy of the death penalty, according to Deuteronomy 18:20. Paul also condemned anyone who brings "another gospel" (see Gal. 1:8-9), which Mormonism surely is.

A careful study of the writings of Joseph Smith, his contemporaries, and his successors not only demonstrates how they disagree with each other, but, more importantly, how they often disagree with the teachings of the Bible. The real issue should center on the fact that whenever LDS teachings conflict with the Bible, they should be rejected, not the reverse.

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Notes (Part Two)

- 1 Ezra Taft Benson, *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 140.
- 2 Ibid, 116.
- 3 *Journal of Discourses*, comp. G. D. Watt (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855), 14:216.
- 4 Ibid., 16:161.
- 5 Ibid., 1:50
- 6 Ibid., 1:51.
- 7 *Doctrine and Covenants* 27:11; 116:1; 138:38.
- 8 *Journal of Discourses* 4:1.
- 9 *LDS Church News*, 9 October 1976, 11.
- 10 *Journal of Discourses* 11:286.
- 11 *The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff*, ed. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1983), 3.
- 12 Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 1:8.
- 13 To some Mormons, the Holy Ghost is a separate entity from the Holy Spirit.
- 14 It would be difficult for the Mormon to claim that this passage is translated incorrectly since it reads the same in Joseph Smith's 1833 Inspired Version of the Bible.