

STATEMENT DM807-1

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

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Part One

A significant difficulty when witnessing to a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) is to determine what that individual believes to be doctrinally true. The problem is that the LDS Church has never been consistent as to how official doctrine is ascertained. Although some Mormons give their leaders wide latitude when it comes to spiritual direction, others insist that only the standard works¹ need to be accepted as truth. Still others take a type of postmodern approach and accept what they *feel* to be true as their test for doctrinal authenticity; thus, they often disregard teachings that make them feel uncomfortable. Consequently, a Christian who hopes to dialogue successfully with a Mormon acquaintance needs to understand how Mormons determine what is true.

Since Mormonism began in 1830, its leaders have rejected the idea of a closed canon. This is demonstrated on page 398 of the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*: "Since Latter-day Saints believe in the genuine gift of prophecy, it follows that the revelations received by modern prophets should be esteemed as highly as those received by ancient ones. Hence, the LDS canon of scripture can never be closed." Traditionally Mormonism has insisted that doctrine limited to the Bible is a trademark of an "apostate Christendom." Second Nephi 29:6 in the *Book of Mormon* calls anyone who receives theological truth from the Bible alone a fool.

Tenth LDS President Joseph Fielding Smith believed that new revelation should not be accepted unless it coincided with previous teaching. He wrote, "My words, and the teachings of any other member of the Church, high or low, if they do not square with the revelations, we need not accept them.... We have accepted the four standard works as the measuring yardsticks, or balances, by which we measure every man's doctrine."² Other LDS leaders, however, did not concur with Smith's position.

This was probably best illustrated in a story told by fourth LDS President Wilford Woodruff, and it has since been related in several general conference messages. In an 1897 conference speech, Woodruff recounted how he was present at a meeting in Kirtland, Ohio, when a "leading man in the church" had admonished his contemporaries to confine their revelations to the Bible, *Book of Mormon*, and *Doctrine and Covenants*.³ Mormonism's founder Joseph Smith responded by asking Brigham Young, who later became the second LDS prophet, to give his position on the matter. The story continues:

Brother Brigham took the stand, and he took the Bible, and laid it down; he took the Book of Mormon, and laid it down; and he took the Book of Doctrine and Covenants, and laid it down before him, and he said: "There is the written word of God to us, concerning the work of God from the beginning of the world, almost, to our day." "And now," said he, "when compared with the living oracles those books are nothing to me; those books do not convey the word of God direct to us now, as do the words of a Prophet or a man bearing the Holy Priesthood in our day and generation. I would rather have the living oracles than all the writing in the books." When he was through,

Brother Joseph said to the congregation: “Brother Brigham has told you the word of the Lord, and he has told you the truth.”⁴

Defining LDS Scripture. Page 55 of the LDS Church manual entitled *Gospel Principles* reads, “In addition to these four books of scripture, the inspired words of our living prophets become scripture to us. Their words come to us through conferences, Church publications, and instructions to local priesthood leaders.”

Several leaders in the Mormon Church have emphatically stated that the *living oracles* carry even more weight than the standard works. Speaking in conference in 1916, LDS Apostle Orson Whitney said, “No book presides over this Church, and no book lies at its foundation. You cannot pile up books enough to take the place of God’s priesthood, inspired by the power of the Holy Ghost. That is the constitution of the Church of Christ... There is no book big enough or good enough to preside over this Church.”⁵

According to the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, “Neither written scripture, nor natural theology, supercedes the ‘living oracles.’”⁶ In his “Fourteen Fundamentals in Following the Prophet” speech given in 1980, Ezra Taft Benson insisted that the “living prophet is more vital to us than the standard works.”

Sticking solely to the standard works is inconsistent for several important reasons:

1. Most revelations by LDS prophets never get into the standard works.
2. Previously canonized doctrines have been reversed. For instance, Section 101 in the 1835 *Doctrine and Covenants* (D&C) outlawed the practice of polygamy. In 1876, Section 101 was dropped and Section 132, which encouraged the practice of polygamy, was added.
3. The standard works “measuring rod” was ignored on at least two occasions in order to make doctrinal course corrections. They included the abandonment of polygamy in 1890 (Section 132) and the lifting of the priesthood ban against those of African heritage in 1978 (Abraham 1:26).
4. Later leaders expunged teachings that were part of the canon. For instance, the “Lectures on Faith” were added to the 1835 *Doctrine and Covenants*. In 1921, the Lectures were deleted from the D&C.

D&C 68:2 states that in order for a speaker to give the church scripture, he must first be “moved by the Holy Ghost.” In 1954, J. Reuben Clark, a member of the LDS First Presidency, describes what this means: “We can tell when the speakers are ‘moved upon by the Holy Ghost’ only when we ourselves are ‘moved upon by the Holy Ghost.’ In a way, this completely shifts the responsibility from them to us to determine when they so speak.”⁷ You might ask your Mormon acquaintances if their feelings have ever deceived them. If so, how can this be a foolproof test? Moreover, if the average member actually has such a capability for determining truth, why are prophets even needed?

The Definers of Truth. The job of clarifying the position of the church has been entrusted to the Mormon prophet as well as to his two counselors. These three men compose the First Presidency. It is not the job of LDS lay members or employees at church-owned schools. Ezra Taft Benson stated, “Doctrinal interpretation is the province of the First Presidency. The Lord has given that stewardship to them by revelation. No [mere] teacher has the right to interpret doctrine for the members of the Church.”⁸

When asked by Larry King to describe his role as the leader of a major religion, current LDS President Gordon Hinckley replied, “My role is to declare doctrine.”⁹ This thinking can be traced to *Doctrine and Covenants* 21:4. Speaking specifically of Joseph Smith, the commandment states that members are to “give heed unto *all* his words and commandments which he shall give unto you as he receiveth them, walking in all holiness before me; for his word ye shall receive, as if from mine own mouth, in all patience and faith” (emphasis added). President Harold B. Lee taught that this passage applied to LDS prophets in general and should not be limited to just the founder of Mormonism.¹⁰

Lee also said, “We are not dependent only upon the revelations given in the past as contained in our standard works — as wonderful as they are — but we have a mouthpiece to whom God does reveal and is revealing His mind and will.”¹¹ Page 21 of *Teachings of the Living Prophets* says, “Not every word they speak should be thought of as an official interpretation or pronouncement. However, their discourses to the Saints and their official writings should be considered products of their prophetic calling and should be heeded.”

Christians who ask Mormons to own up to what their leaders have said are often rebuffed with a comment made by Joseph Smith in 1843. Speaking to two members in a private conversation, he remarked, “A prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such.” All things being equal, however, this noncanonical comment really becomes no more authoritative than the quotes that the Mormon might be trying to sidestep. Some leaders have also insisted that it is wrong to “pit a dead prophet against a living prophet.” Common sense would dictate that if the LDS leaders were getting their truth from the same source — presumably God — this should not be a problem.

One would think that these men speak with some semblance of authority when they stand behind church pulpits or take the time to put their thoughts into writing. In light of the above quotes, it is appropriate for Christians to hold Mormons accountable for what their leaders have said. Should an individual Mormon disagree, you might politely ask why you should be compelled to trust in leaders whom even he doesn’t find to be fully reliable.

In part two of this article, we will look closely at the subjective test of the Mormon “testimony,” as well as the idea that Mormon prophets cannot lead the church astray.

Notes (Part One)

- 1 These include the Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price.
- 2 *Doctrines of Salvation* 3:203 (Bookcraft: Salt Lake City, 1954).
- 3 At this time the *Pearl of Great Price* was not a part of the LDS canon.
- 4 *Conference Report*, October 1897, 22–23.
- 5 1916 *Conference Report*, 55–56. Also quoted in the official LDS Church manual *Teachings of the Living Prophets* (1982), 20.
- 6 *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan, 1982), 257.
- 7 *Church News*, 31 July 1954
- 8 *Teachings of the Living Prophets*, 25.
- 9 *Larry King Live*, 8 September 1998.
- 10 *Stand Ye in the Holy Places* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co, 1988), 129.
- 11 *Ibid*, 164.