





By Elder
Jeffrey R. Holland
Of the Quorum of
the Twelve Apostles

KNOWING THE Godhead

*We are to know these Divine Beings
in every way we can. We are to
love Them, draw near to Them,
obey Them, and try to be like Them.*

From an address, “The Godhead,” delivered during the seminar for new mission presidents at the Provo Missionary Training Center on June 23, 2013.

The Prophet Joseph Smith said, “It is the first principle of the gospel to know for a certainty the character of God.”¹ Furthermore, he added, “I want you all to know Him, and to be familiar with Him.”² We must have “a *correct* idea of his . . . perfections, and attributes” and an admiration for “the excellency of [His] character.”³

I wish to expand the Prophet’s challenge to us and say that we and our missionaries, our members, and our investigators must know for a certainty the character of the members of the *Godhead*. We must have a correct idea of Their individual perfections and attributes and an admiration for the excellency of *Their* personal character.

It is not happenstance that the first article of our faith is “We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost” (Articles of Faith 1:1). The message is clear for all who teach the gospel. There is no point in going on to the other truths we believe if we haven’t fixed in our minds and in the minds of those we teach the preeminent role of the Godhead in our doctrine and in our eternal destiny. We are to know these Divine Beings in every way we can. We are to love Them, draw near to Them, obey Them, and try to be like Them.

When we bring people into the Church, we are not baptizing them into the Church of a man, whether that man be Joseph Smith or Brigham Young or Thomas S. Monson—revere those prophets as we do. And we are not baptizing them into the Church of happy families or of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

When we bring people into the Church, we baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. In doing so, we are leading them back to the presence of the Father through the ministry, Atonement, and grace of His Son, with the influence of the Holy Ghost guiding them to this goal. We must always keep uppermost in our minds this preeminence of the Godhead as both means and end as we undertake the work of salvation.

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If, as King Benjamin counseled, we *truly* know these Divine Beings whom we serve and make certain They are not strangers to us and are never far from the thoughts and intents of our heart (see Mosiah 5:13), then we might have the results King Benjamin had. And what were those? His people experienced “a mighty change,” had “no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually,” and were “willing to enter into a covenant . . . to do [God’s] will, and to be obedient to his commandments in all things that he [should] command [them], all the remainder of [their] days” (Mosiah 5:2, 5).

That was the impact of King Benjamin’s teachings upon his congregation, and it is a *perfect* scriptural definition of the *real growth* in our converts we are emphasizing as we establish the Church in “all the world” (Mark 16:15).

As the Savior Himself taught, missionary work—the work of salvation—is like a net that we are throwing to a wider and wider world of nations, cultures, and people. As such, we will gather, as the parable says, fish “of every kind” (Matthew 13:47). Many of those “fish” in our expanding frontier do not know who God is or what His Fatherhood is actually like; they do not know who Jesus Christ really is or why His is the only name given under heaven whereby we may be saved (see Acts 4:12); they do not know who the Holy Ghost is or why this member of the Godhead “was sent forth to teach the truth” (D&C 50:14).

Knowledge of the Godhead

Of course, there are a lot of other things these fish gathered of every kind don’t know, but if they are to embrace the restored gospel and truly find salvation for their souls, it will have to begin with some knowledge and understanding of the members of the Godhead. Ultimately, “true and saving worship is found only among those who know the truth about . . . the Godhead and who understand the true relationship men should have with each member of [what one of the Brethren has called] that Eternal Presidency.”⁴

Elder Bruce R. McConkie (1915–85) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles reminded us that Lucifer understands

the significance of such doctrine, even if we don't. He said:

“There is no salvation in believing . . . false doctrine, particularly a false or unwise view about the Godhead or any of its members. . . .

“It follows that the devil would rather spread false doctrine about God and the Godhead, and induce false feelings with reference to any one of them, than almost any other thing he could do.”⁵

So no investigator can come into this Church with a *real* testimony, with *real* conversion, with what we are seeking for and calling real growth in each convert, unless he or she has had at least the beginning of some personal, spiritual, true experience with God. That kind of true experience can come only when there is the realization that He is a real being, an actual person, a literal Father of flesh and bone who speaks and sees and feels, who knows all His children's names and all their needs, who hears all their prayers, and who wants all His children in His Church. These investigators need to know He has a plan for their salvation and that He has given commandments as to how we find our way back to Him.

A God who cares about them as tenderly as a parent cares for a child cannot be an ethereal mist or a vague philosophical First Cause or a deistic absentee landlord. He must be recognized for what He truly is—a merciful, compassionate Father, in whose image every one of His children has been made and before Whom all of us will one day again stand—and then kneel! Few of our investigators will know *that* kind of God now, in or out of contemporary Christianity.



In that regard, it is most significant that lesson 1 in *Preach My Gospel* begins with the simple declaration that “God is our Heavenly Father.”⁶ In that lesson the first determination missionaries are to make is what each person being taught understands regarding the true nature of God.

If missionaries can get a proper understanding of God in the minds and hearts of their investigators at the outset of their teaching, everything else will fall into place much more easily in all the instruction that follows.

The Mission and Message of Jesus Christ

In like manner, elder, sister, and investigator alike must appreciate much more than they do the majesty of the mission and message of Jesus Christ, who came down from the Father and taught what the Father taught Him. All must come to realize that Jesus came into mortality to show us the way, the truth, and the life. Indeed, He *is* the *only* way, the *whole* truth, and the *perfect* life. As such, He is the only child in the human family of whom the Father can fully and completely

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say, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 17:5).

We are to have faith in Christ, trust that He has redeemed us from death physically and hell spiritually, accept His Atonement as the *only* means of reconciling ourselves before God, and acknowledge that there is no other path to salvation. The world, if it is to be redeemed, must bend its knee and with tongue confess that Jesus is the Christ, the living Son of the living God. We need to teach with faith and fervor “the doctrine of Christ” (Hebrews 6:1; 2 John 1:9; 2 Nephi 31:2, 21; 32:6; Jacob 7:2, 6) as declared in the scriptures and as summarized in lesson 3 of *Preach My Gospel*.

Our fish of the far-flung net need to know that the Holy Ghost is the member of the Godhead with whom they will have their most frequent and most intimate relationship as they receive the missionaries and pray for heavenly guidance regarding their message. It is this member of the Godhead who will *lead* investigators to truth and will then *bear witness* of that truth when they encounter it. The investigators must be taught to recognize the Spirit when it manifests itself during the course of the lessons. Certainly the missionaries must understand the Holy Ghost’s divine role in the conversion process and must strive to carry the Spirit with them at all times.

“Unto what were ye ordained?” the Lord asks. “To preach my gospel by the Spirit, even the Comforter which was sent forth to teach the truth. . . .

“Wherefore, he that preacheth [by the Spirit] and he that receiveth [by the Spirit], understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together” (D&C 50:13–14, 22).

We can be absolutely certain that it *will not* go well—for the missionaries or for their investigators—if we slide past our teaching of the Divine. We must not point toward mortal leaders before we have taught and testified of celestial ones. We must not try to teach ancillary truths before we have taught the fundamental ones. We must not rush toward baptism and the goal of a new convert before we have taught true faith in God, explained the need for true repentance in Christ, and made certain that those crucial first shoots of a convert’s growing testimony are kept strong and viable through the nourishing agency of the Holy Spirit.

Christian Confusion

Regarding the distinct nature of these Divine Beings, our latter-day revelations teach that “the Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit” (D&C 130:22).

You can’t get a baseline statement clearer than that! But unfortunately, nearly two millennia of Christian history have sown terrible confusion and near-fatal error in this regard. Many evolutions and iterations of religious creeds have greatly distorted the simple clarity of true doctrine, declaring the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost to be abstract, absolute, transcendent, immanent, consubstantial, coeternal, and unknowable; without body, parts, or passions; and dwelling outside space and time.

In such creeds, all three members are separate persons, but they are a single being, the oft-noted “mystery of the trinity.” They are

three distinct persons, yet not three Gods but one. All three persons are incomprehensible, yet it is one God who is incomprehensible.

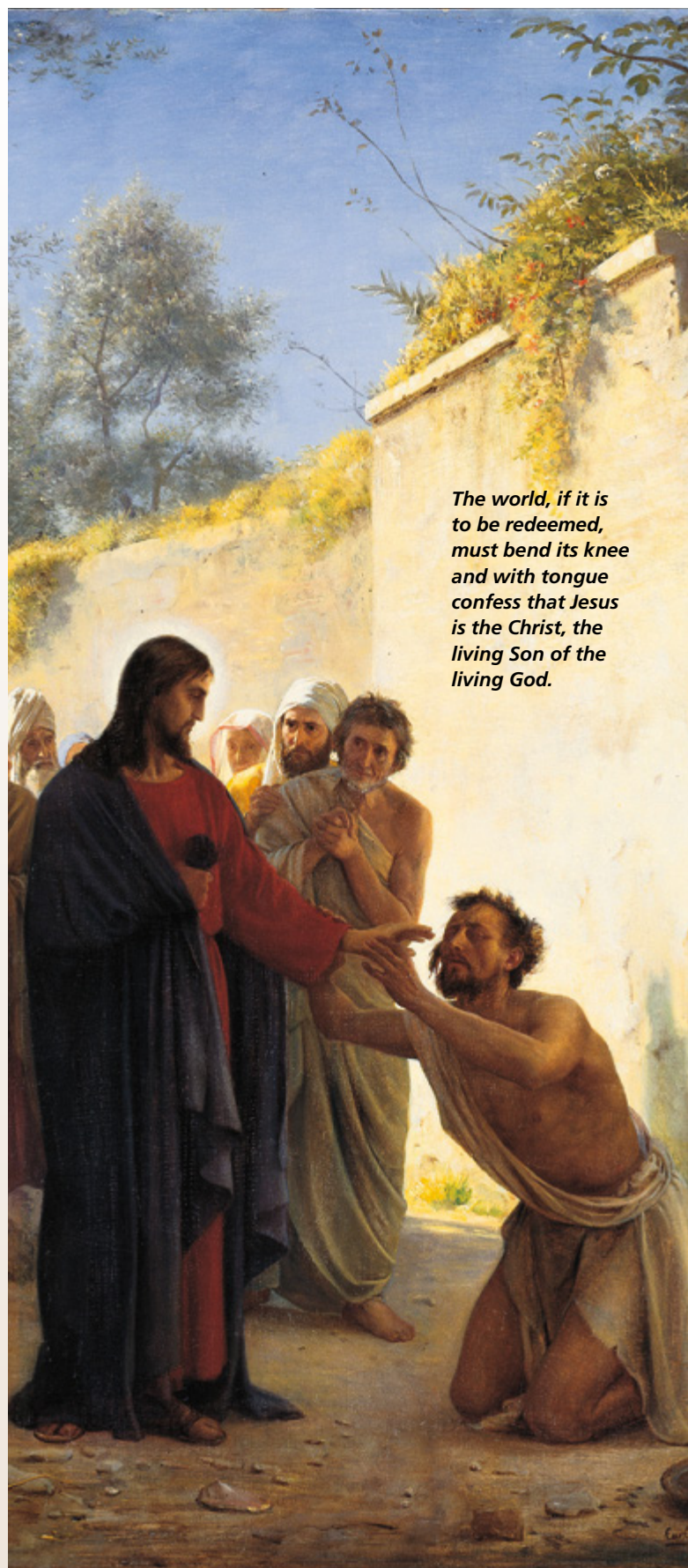
We agree with our critics on at least that point—that such a formulation for divinity is incomprehensible. With such a confusing definition of God being imposed upon the Church, little wonder that a fourth-century monk cried out, “Woe is me! They have taken my God away from me, . . . and I know not whom to adore or to address.”⁷ How are we to trust, love, and worship, to say nothing of striving to be like, One who is incomprehensible and unknowable? What of Jesus’s prayer that it “is life eternal, that they might *know thee* the only true God, *and Jesus Christ*, whom *thou* hast sent”? (John 17:3; emphasis added).

It is not our purpose ever to demean any person’s belief or the doctrine of any religion. We extend to all the same respect for their doctrine that we ask for ours. (That too is an article of our faith.) But no less a source than the stalwart *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, the gold standard in that field, records that “the formal doctrine of the Trinity as it was defined by the great church councils of the fourth and fifth centuries is not to be found [anywhere] in the [New Testament].”⁸

So we are very comfortable, frankly, in letting it be known that we do not hold a fourth- or fifth-century, pagan-influenced view of the Godhead, and neither did those first Christian Saints who were eyewitnesses of the living Christ.⁹ We are New Testament—*not* Nicene—Christians.

The Unity of the Godhead

However, I now quickly stress that when we have made the point about the distinctiveness of Their persons, it is equally important to stress how unified They are and how truly *One* the Godhead is. I think I am safe in saying that part of the reason we are so misunderstood by others in the Christian tradition is because in stressing the individual personages of the Godhead, we have not followed that up often enough by both conceding and *insisting* upon Their unity in virtually every other imaginable way. For this we



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have reaped needless criticism, and we have made our LDS position harder to be understood than it needs to be.

Indeed, the great “doctrine of Christ” passage in 2 Nephi 31 ends with this declaration: “This is the doctrine of Christ, and the only and true doctrine of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, which is one God, without end” (2 Nephi 31:21).

We have all read the Savior’s majestic Intercessory Prayer in John 17. We know it to be a declaration of unity between the Father and the Son and between Them and us, Their earthly disciples. Read it often, particularly inasmuch as President David O. McKay (1873–1970) once called it “the greatest prayer . . . ever uttered in this world.”¹⁰ We ought to strive to be one with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, as Jesus prayed we would be.

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An Apostle’s Witness

I close with my testimony of each of these Divine Beings, who constitute that “Eternal Presidency” spoken of. I bear witness of the Holy Ghost *by the spirit* of the Holy Ghost, witnessing and testifying being two of His great roles. I bear witness that the Holy Ghost is a teacher, a Comforter, and the agent of personal revelation. I bear witness that the Holy Ghost will bring all things to our remembrance—a particular blessing inasmuch as remembering is one of the great commandments given to us, including in the sacramental prayers (see D&C 20:77, 79).

I testify that through the power of the Holy Ghost, we can chase darkness from among us and be warned against danger and against untruth. I bear witness that the Holy Ghost is also the Holy Spirit of Promise, confirming and authenticating covenants and ordinances and ultimately sealing all saving blessings unto eternal life. I am in awe that we have such ready access to a member of the Godhead and have it so constantly and repeatedly if we live worthy of it. I express my near-inexpressible gratitude for the gift of the Holy Ghost.

I bear witness of Jesus Christ, the living Son of the living God, who paid the liberating ransom for your soul and my soul and the soul of every man, woman, and child from Adam to the end of the world. I testify that the first principle of the gospel is *faith* in the Lord Jesus Christ and that it is the foundation of and the central message of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

I testify that every human being born into this world is born with the Light of Christ in his or her soul. I bear witness that He is the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End, the Alpha and Omega of our salvation. I declare that He is the great Jehovah, the redemptive I Am, the Lamb of God slain from before the foundation of the world. I testify that in Him the fulness did dwell and that He was born, lived, and died a perfect, sinless Man, without blemish and without spot.

I am grateful that the authority of Jesus Christ, which regulates everything of eternal significance in this universe, bears His name—the Holy Priesthood after the Order of the Son of God. If I were to live to be a thousand years of age, I could never adequately express my wonder and inadequacy at being called to be one of His Apostles, a witness of His name in all the world.

*I stand all amazed at the love Jesus offers me,
Confused at the grace that so fully he proffers me.*¹¹

I bear witness of God the Eternal Father, the grand Elohim, my Father and your Father, who gave us spiritual life. I testify that He is the Man of Holiness, that mercy and goodness, love and compassion only begin to note His chief and eternal characteristics. I testify that Christ came to show us the Father and as such was rightly called the Son of Man (of Holiness).

I bear witness that God our Father is the author of the great plan of salvation and that what came to be known as the gospel of Jesus Christ is also known as “the gospel of God” (Romans 1:1; see also verses 2–3). I bear witness that the Father was and is the Creator of all things, working through Jehovah and other heavenly agents to accomplish that Creation and sharing the title of Creator with His Beloved Son. I testify that we are to *serve* the Father in the name of the Son just as we are to *pray* to the Father in the name of the Son.

I testify that Jesus Christ came to do the will of the Father, taught the doctrine of the Father, and worked out His own salvation through the Father. I bear most solemn witness that the



Father so loved the world, His children, that He gave His best child, His perfect child, His Only Begotten Child, that whosoever would believe in Him would have everlasting life (see John 3:36; 6:47; Helaman 14:8).

I am grateful for the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, in whose names the sacred and saving ordinances from baptism to temple sealings are performed in this Church. I invite each of you to know deeply these Divine Beings. ■

NOTES

1. Joseph Smith, in *History of the Church*, 6:305.
2. Joseph Smith, in *History of the Church*, 6:305.
3. *Lectures on Faith* (1985), 38, 42.
4. Bruce R. McConkie, “Our Relationship with the Lord” (Brigham Young University devotional, Mar. 2, 1982), 1, speeches.byu.edu.
5. Bruce R. McConkie, “Our Relationship with the Lord,” 1–2.
6. *Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service* (2004), 31.
7. In Owen Chadwick, ed., *Western Asceticism* (1958), 235.
8. Paul J. Achtemeier, ed., *Harper’s Bible Dictionary* (1985), 1099.
9. For a thorough discussion of this issue, see Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (1991), 71–89; see also Robert L. Millet, *Getting at the Truth: Responding to Difficult Questions about LDS Beliefs* (2004), 106–22.
10. David O. McKay, in Conference Report, Oct. 1967, 5.
11. “I Stand All Amazed,” *Hymns*, no. 193.

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