



This article is excerpted from an address given to the faculty and students of Harvard Law School on February 26, 2010.

We Latter-day Saints know that our doctrines and values are not widely understood by those not of our faith. This was demonstrated by Gary C. Lawrence's nationwide study published in his recent book, *How Americans View Mormonism*. Three-quarters of those surveyed associated our Church with high moral standards, but about half thought we were secretive and mysterious and had "weird beliefs."¹ When asked to select various words they thought described Latter-day Saints in general, 87 percent checked "strong family values," 78 percent checked "honest," and 45 percent checked "blind followers."²

When Lawrence's interviewers asked, "To the best of your understanding, what is the main claim of

FUNDAMENTAL

TO OUR FAITH

**By Elder
Dallin H. Oaks**
Of the Quorum of the
Twelve Apostles



Mormonism?" only 14 percent could describe anything close to the idea of restoration or reestablishment of the original Christian faith. Similarly, when another national survey asked respondents what one word best described their impression of the Mormon religion, not one person suggested the words or ideas of original or restoration Christianity.³

My disappointment with these findings is only slightly reduced by Lawrence's other findings and observation

As an Apostle I am called to be a witness of the doctrine, work, and authority of Christ in all the world. In that capacity I bear witness of the truth of these premises of our faith.



that on the subject of religion Americans in general are “deeply religious” but “profoundly ignorant.” For example, 68 percent said they prayed at least several times a week, and 44 percent said they attended religious services almost every week. At the same time, only half could name even one of the four Gospels, most could not name the first book of the Bible, and 10 percent thought Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife.⁴

Many factors contribute to the predominant shallowness on the subject of religion, but one of them is surely higher education’s general hostility or indifference to religion. With but few exceptions, colleges and universities have become value-free places where attitudes toward religion are neutral at best. Students and other religious people who believe in the living reality of God and moral absolutes are being marginalized.

It seems unrealistic to expect higher education as a whole to resume a major role in teaching moral values. That will remain the domain of homes, churches, and church-related colleges and universities. All should hope for success in this vital task. The academy can pretend to neutrality on questions of right and wrong, but society cannot survive on such neutrality.

I have chosen three clusters of truths to present as fundamental premises of the faith of Latter-day Saints:

1. The nature of God, including the role of the three members of the Godhead and the corollary truth that there are moral absolutes.
2. The purpose of life.
3. The threefold sources of truth about

man and the universe: science, the scriptures, and continuing revelation—and how we can know them.

1. The Nature of God

My first fundamental premise of our faith is that God is real and so are eternal truths and values not provable by current scientific methods. These ideas are inevitably linked. Like other believers, we proclaim the existence of the ultimate lawgiver, God our Eternal Father, and the existence of moral absolutes. We reject the moral relativism that is becoming the unofficial creed of much of modern culture.

For us the truth about the nature of God and our relationship to Him is the key to everything else. Significantly, our belief in the nature of God is what distinguishes us from the formal creeds of most Christian denominations. Our Articles of Faith begin as follows: “We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost” (verse 1).

We have this belief in the Godhead in common with the rest of Christianity, but to us it means something different than to most. We maintain that these three members of the Godhead are three separate and distinct beings and that God the Father is not a spirit but a glorified Being with a tangible body, as is His resurrected Son, Jesus Christ. Though separate in identity, They are one in purpose. We maintain that Jesus referred to this relationship when He prayed to His Father that His disciples would “be one” even as Jesus and His Father are one (John 17:11)—united in purpose but not in identity. Our unique belief 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) is vital to us. But, as Gary Lawrence’s interviews demonstrate, we have not effectively conveyed this belief to others.⁵

We maintain that the three members of the Godhead are three separate and distinct beings and that God the Father is not a spirit but a glorified Being with a tangible body, as is His resurrected Son, Jesus Christ. Though separate in identity, They are one in purpose.



Our belief in the nature of God comes from what we call the First Vision, which began the Restoration of the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Joseph Smith, an unschooled boy of 14 seeking to know which church he should join, was given a vision in which he saw “two Personages” of indescribable “brightness and glory.” One of Them pointed to the other and said, “This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!” (Joseph Smith—History 1:17). God the Son told the young prophet that all the “creeds” of the churches of that day “were an abomination in his sight” (Joseph Smith—History 1:19). This divine declaration condemned the creeds, not the faithful seekers who believed them.

Joseph Smith’s First Vision showed that the prevailing concepts of the nature of God and the Godhead were untrue and could not lead their adherents to the destiny God desired for them. A subsequent outpouring of modern scripture revealed the significance of this fundamental truth and gave us the Book of Mormon. This new book of scripture is a second witness of Jesus Christ. It affirms the biblical prophecies and teachings of the nature and mission of Christ. It enlarges our understanding of His gospel and His teachings during His earthly ministry. It also provides many teachings and illustrations of the revelations by which we may know the truth of these things.

These teachings explain our testimony of Christ. We are not grounded in the wisdom of the world or the philosophies of men—however traditional or respected they may be. Our testimony of Jesus Christ is based on the revelations of God to His prophets and to us individually.

What does our testimony of Jesus Christ cause us to affirm? Jesus Christ is the Only Begotten Son of God the Eternal Father. He is the Creator. Through His incomparable mortal ministry, He is our teacher. Because of His Resurrection, all who have ever lived will be raised from the dead. He is the Savior, whose atoning sacrifice opens the door for us to be forgiven of our personal sins so that we can be cleansed to return to the presence of God our Eternal Father. This is the central message of the prophets of all ages. Joseph Smith stated this great truth in our third

article of faith: “We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel.”

As members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we testify with the Book of Mormon prophet King Benjamin “that there shall be no other name given nor any other way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent” (Mosiah 3:17).

Why is Christ the only way? How could He break the bands of death? How was it possible for Him to take upon Himself the sins of all mankind? How can our soiled and sinful selves be cleansed and our bodies be resurrected by His Atonement? These are mysteries I do not fully understand. To me the miracle of the Atonement of Jesus Christ is incomprehensible, but the Holy Ghost has given me a witness of its truthfulness, and I rejoice that I can spend my life in proclaiming it.

2. The Purpose of Mortal Life

My second fundamental premise concerns the purpose of mortal life. This follows from our understanding of the purposes of God the Eternal Father and concerns our destiny as His children. Our theology begins with the assurance that we lived as spirits before we came to this earth. It affirms that this mortal life has a purpose. And it teaches that our highest aspiration is to become like our heavenly parents, which will empower us to perpetuate our family relationships throughout eternity. We were placed on earth to acquire a physical body and—through the Atonement of Jesus Christ and by obedience to the laws and ordinances of His gospel—to qualify for the glorified celestial condition and relationships that are called exaltation or eternal life.

We are properly known as a family-centered Church, but what is not well understood is that our family-centeredness is not just focused on mortal relationships but is also a matter of fundamental theology. Under the great plan of the loving Creator, the mission of His Church is to help us achieve exaltation in the celestial kingdom, and that can be

accomplished only through an eternal marriage between a man and a woman (see D&C 131:1–3).

My faithful widowed mother had no confusion about the eternal nature of the family relationship. She always honored the position of our faithful deceased father. She made him a presence in our home. She spoke of the eternal duration of their temple marriage and of our destiny to be together as a family in the next life. She often reminded us of what our father would like us to do so we could qualify for the Savior's promise that we could be a family forever. She never referred to herself as a widow, and it never occurred to me that she was. To me, as a boy growing up, she wasn't a widow. She had a husband, and we had a father. He was just away for a while.

We affirm that marriage is necessary for the accomplishment of God's plan to provide the approved setting for mortal birth and to prepare family members for eternal life. Knowledge of God's plan gives Latter-day Saints a unique perspective on marriage and children. We look on the bearing and nurturing of children as part of God's plan and a sacred duty of those given the power to participate in it. We believe that the ultimate treasures on earth and in heaven are our children and our posterity. And we believe that we must contend for the kind of mortal families that provide the best conditions for the development and happiness of children—all children.

The power to create mortal life is the most exalted power God has given His children. The use of this creative power was mandated in the first commandment to "be fruitful, and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). Another important commandment forbade its misuse: "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14), and

2 *Our theology affirms that this mortal life has a purpose. And it teaches that our highest aspiration is to become like our heavenly parents, which will empower us to perpetuate our family relationships throughout eternity.*



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY LAURENI FOCHEITO

“ye should abstain from fornication” (1 Thessalonians 4:3). The emphasis we place on this law of chastity is explained by our understanding of the purpose of our procreative powers in the accomplishment of God’s plan.

There are many political, legal, and social pressures for changes that confuse gender, deemphasize the importance of marriage or change its definition, or homogenize the differences between men and women that are essential to accomplish God’s great plan of happiness. Our eternal perspective sets us against such changes.

Finally, our understanding of the purpose of mortal life includes some unique doctrines about what follows mortality. Like other Christians, we believe that when we leave this life, we go to a heaven (paradise) or a hell. But to us this two-part division of the righteous and the wicked is merely temporary while the spirits of the dead await their resurrection and Final Judgment (see Alma 40:11–14). The destinations that follow the Final Judgment are much more diverse, and they stand as evidence of the magnitude of God’s love for His children—all of them.

God’s love is so great that He requires His children to obey His laws because only through that obedience can they progress toward the eternal destiny He desires for them. Thus, in the Final Judgment we will all be assigned to the kingdom of glory that is commensurate with our obedience to His law. In his second letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul told of a vision of a man “caught up to the third heaven” (2 Corinthians 12:2). Speaking of the resurrection of the dead, he described “bodies” with different glories, like the respective glories of the sun, moon, and stars. He referred to the first two of these as “celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial” (see 1 Corinthians 15:40–42). For us, eternal life in the celestial, the highest, glory is not a mystical union with an incomprehensible spirit-god. Rather, eternal life is family life with a loving Father in Heaven and with our progenitors and our posterity.

The theology of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ is comprehensive, universal, merciful, and true. Following the necessary experience of mortal life, all sons and

daughters of God will ultimately be resurrected and go to a kingdom of glory more wonderful than any mortal can comprehend. With only a few exceptions, even the very wicked will ultimately go to a marvelous—though lesser—kingdom of glory. All of this will occur because of God’s great love for His children, and it is all made possible because of the Atonement and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, “who glorifies the Father, and saves all the works of his hands” (D&C 76:43).

3. Sources of Truth

Latter-day Saints have a great interest in pursuing knowledge. Brigham Young (1801–77) said it best: “[Our] religion . . . prompts [us] to search diligently after knowledge. There is no other people in existence more eager to see, hear, learn, and understand truth.”⁶

On another occasion he explained that we encourage our members “to increase [their] knowledge . . . in every branch of [learning], for all wisdom, and all the arts and sciences in the world are from God, and are designed for the good of his people.”⁷

We seek after knowledge, but we do so in a special way because we believe there are two dimensions of knowledge: material and spiritual. We seek knowledge in the material dimension by scientific inquiry and in the spiritual dimension by revelation. Revelation is God’s communication to man—to prophets and to every one of us if we seek it.

Revelation is clearly one of the distinctive characteristics of our faith. The Prophet Joseph Smith was directed and edified by a continuing flow of revelation throughout his life. The immense quantity of his published revelations, including the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants, carried forward his unique calling as the Prophet of this last dispensation of time. In this *prophetic revelation*—to Joseph Smith and to his successors as Presidents of the Church—God has revealed truths and commandments to His prophet-leaders for the enlightenment of His people and for the governance and direction of His Church.

This is the kind of revelation described in the Old Testament teaching that “the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7). Joseph Smith declared, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was founded upon direct revelation, as the true Church of God has ever been.”⁸ He asked, “Take away the Book of Mormon and the revelations, and where is our religion?” He answered, “We have none.”⁹

Joseph Smith also taught that because revelation did not cease with the early Apostles but continues in these modern times, each person can receive *personal revelation* for his or her conversion, understanding, and decision making. “It is the privilege of the children of God to come to God and get revelation,” he said. “God is not a respecter of persons; we all have the same privilege.”¹⁰

The New Testament describes such personal revelation. For example, when Peter affirmed his conviction that Jesus was the divine Son of God, the Savior declared, “Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 16:17).

Personal revelation—sometimes called “inspiration”—comes in many forms. Most often it is by words or thoughts communicated to the mind by sudden enlightenment or by positive or negative feelings about proposed courses of action. Usually it comes in response to earnest and prayerful seeking. Jesus taught, “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (Matthew 7:7). Revelation comes when we keep the commandments of God and thus qualify for the companionship and communication of the Holy Spirit.

3 We seek knowledge in the material dimension by scientific inquiry and in the spiritual dimension by revelation. Revelation is God’s communication to man—to prophets and to every one of us if we seek it.



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY RUTH SIPUS

Some wonder how members of the Church accept a modern prophet's teachings to guide their personal lives, something that is unusual in most religious traditions. Our answer to the charge that Latter-day Saints follow their leaders out of "blind obedience" is this same personal revelation. We respect our leaders and presume inspiration in their leadership of the Church and in their teachings. But we are all privileged and encouraged to confirm their teachings by prayerfully seeking and receiving revelatory confirmation directly from God.

Most Christians believe that God closed the scriptural canon—the authoritative collection of sacred books used as scriptures—shortly after the death of Christ and that there have been no comparable revelations since that time. Joseph Smith taught and demonstrated that the scriptural canon is open.¹¹ In fact, the canon of scripture is open in two ways, and the idea of continuing revelation is crucial to both of these.

First, Joseph Smith taught that God will guide His children by giving new additions to the canon of scriptures. The Book of Mormon is such an addition. So are the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price. Continuing revelation is necessary for us to receive what the Lord would have us understand and do in our own time and circumstances.

Second, continuing revelation opens the canon as readers of scripture, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, find new scriptural meaning and direction for their personal circumstances. The Apostle Paul wrote that "all scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Timothy 3:16; see also 2 Peter 1:21) and that "the things of God knoweth

no man, [except he has] the Spirit of God" (1 Corinthians 2:11; see footnote c, from Joseph Smith Translation). This means that in order to understand scripture, we need personal inspiration from the Spirit of the Lord to enlighten our minds. Consequently, we encourage our members to

study the scriptures and prayerfully seek inspiration to know their meanings for themselves. The ultimate knowledge comes by personal revelation through the Holy Ghost.

Jesus taught, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20). To me, to countless other believers, and to many observers, the fruits are good—good for the members, good for their families, good for their communities, and good for their nations. The millions of dollars worth of supplies and services The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its members quietly and efficiently provide in response to tragedies such as the earthquake in Haiti in January 2010 are evidence of that fact.

As an Apostle I am called to be a witness of the doctrine, work, and authority of Christ in all the

world. In that capacity I bear witness of the truth of these premises of our faith. ■

For the full text in English, visit www.lds.org/fundamental-premises-of-our-faith.

NOTES

1. Gary C. Lawrence, *How Americans View Mormonism* (2008), 32.
2. *How Americans View Mormonism*, 34.
3. See *How Americans View Mormonism*, 42.
4. See *How Americans View Mormonism*, 40.
5. See *How Americans View Mormonism*, 49.
6. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (1997), 194.
7. *Teachings of Brigham Young*, 193.
8. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 195.
9. *Teachings: Joseph Smith*, 196.
10. *Teachings: Joseph Smith*, 132.
11. See *Teachings: Joseph Smith*, 193–216, 265–66.

SHARING THIS ARTICLE

The following ideas may help you share Elder Oaks's article:

- Prayerfully think of a friend who could benefit from reading this article. As you visit that friend, consider sharing in simple terms how the gospel has blessed your life.
- Consider sharing this article electronically. Visit www.liahona.lds.org, find the article in the January issue, and click "Share." In the message you send with the article, you could comment on how the basic doctrines Elder Oaks shares are meaningful to you.