

What is a Prophet?

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“The Prophet”

Mormons are fond of prophets. We love the word, and we love the concept. The idea that men in the history of the world, even men in our own time, have had close contact with God is inspiring. It is a starting point for our own faith as we reach out to God ourselves. It is energizing. The word itself has power for Latter-day Saints, acting as a shorthand container for assumptions and beliefs about revelation and authority. As our use of the word has evolved in the last 170 years, the assumptions and beliefs it contains have evolved as well.

Joseph Smith was called a "prophet" by those who believed he had direct communication with God¹. It is a custom going back to 1836 that Latter-day Saints also sustain members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and the First Presidency as "prophets and seers". This first sustaining at Kirtland initiated a tradition wherein the title "prophet" was applied to men simply due to the office they held, regardless of any special revelation, connection with God, or even basic worthiness. Many (or most) of those first men sustained as "prophets" were rascals who quickly apostatized. Those who remained and served, while they did receive light and inspiration in different degrees, never claimed to manifest the qualifying prophetic gifts that Joseph had. While the saints sustained these leaders as "prophets" it was generally understood that the saints were not obligated to receive all of their words as scripture.²

Those living in the 19th century could hear firsthand accounts of mass apostasy among the apostles and first presidency in Kirtland and Nauvoo. They would see fundamental doctrines regarding the nature of God debated in general conference, one "prophet" arguing one position, another "prophet" arguing a contrary position.³ Thus they would have had no need to suppose that the title "prophet" was anything but an aspiration for those leaders. It did not imply sure firsthand knowledge, even on subjects as basic and fundamental as the nature of God. The apostles and presidents after Joseph didn't throw the title around to give weight to their opinions, and the saints didn't casually use the title when speaking of them. For over 100 years after Joseph Smith's death, the title "the prophet" referred almost invariably to Joseph himself, or to an ancient prophet (e.g. "the prophet Daniel").⁴

It wasn't until the mid 20th century that Church publications began routinely calling the sitting president "the Prophet", once they had a leader for whom the title seemed appropriate in David O. McKay. This mode of reference became the norm through the latter half of the 20th century, expanding to routinely refer to all of the 15 leaders as "prophets."⁵ As often happens, mainstream thought changed with this shift in language. Doctrine shifted to match the thinking, and the title itself was soon taught to be evidence that the holder had already been given the qualifying spiritual

¹ D&C 21:1

² For instance: *"President Wilford Woodruff is a man of wisdom and experience, and we respect him, but we do not believe his personal views or utterances are revelations from God; and when 'Thus saith the Lord', comes from him, the saints investigate it: they do not shut their eyes and take it down like a pill."* -Apostle Charles Penrose (Millennial Star 54:191)

³ Brigham Young and Orson Pratt debating the Adam-God theory, for instance

⁴ To confirm this, search for the term "prophet" in the Journal of Discourses

⁵ www.lds.org/prophets-and-apostles

endowments⁶. The term "the Prophet" is now accompanied by the occasional "mighty prophet", "the living prophet", "God's prophet on the Earth today", and the standard "our beloved prophet." This more expanded use of the title gives compelling divine weight to the opinions, dictates, teachings, and policies of the leadership.⁷ The appearance of reliability and consistency is facilitated by strict correlation that keeps all publications and church-wide addresses in agreement with the matrix of currently-approved doctrines. This has become a sort of pantomime of the kind of "unity of the faith" that will actually exist in Zion, a unity which then will be maintained by our communal revealed knowledge of Christ rather than by an army of scribes, scholars, and censors⁸.

Latter-day Saints are pulled in two directions. On one hand, we are encouraged to trust and follow the counsel from leaders as though it were God's own voice.⁹ On the other hand, we are taught to sift through those leaders' words to discard anything that doesn't conform to the currently approved doctrine.¹⁰ We are threatened with being "cut off" from the covenant people if we "ignore, trifle with, trample upon, or rebel against" their words,¹¹ yet we must remain conscious that today's prophetic teachings may be tomorrow's "deadly heresies."¹² How much confidence should you have in the teachings of the current leaders, when they may all be contradicted by the leaders you will be expected to trust in the future? Countless hours of Mormon blogging are dedicated to wrestling with the contradictions arising from this tug-of-war.

Committed Latter-day Saints have ways of ignoring or sidestepping these contradictions. Mormon apologia is well-stocked with the necessary rationalizations. Many members, finding these rationalizations dissatisfying, step back from full, literal belief in the truth claims of the Church. For them, the tangled web of rationalizations twists itself into an ever-tightening knot of cognitive dissonance, which they ease by discarding the whole religion. This is a drastic solution, however. To remove the knot without throwing the whole string away, sometimes the best remedy is a sharp blade.¹³

⁶ J. Reuben Clark Jr., "When Are Church Leaders' Words Entitled to Claim of Scripture?" *Church News*, July 31, 1954, 9–10;

⁷ Linguistically, referring to a man as "prophet" cognitively categorizes him among the authoritative men who wrote the scriptural canon. For an interesting discussion on how languages can instill patterns of thought, see Guy Deutscher, "Does Language Shape How You Think?"; *New York Times*; August 26, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/29/magazine/29language-t.html>

⁸ Ephesians 4:11-15. For an extensive discussion of the Church's correlation effort, see Daymon Smith's dissertation, found at <http://bycommonconsent.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/daymon-smith-dissertation.pdf>

⁹ A common misuse of D&C 1:38. eg: " *Vastly increased accessibility to the voices of the Lord's servants, which are the same as the Lord's own voice (see D&C 1:38), has little value unless we are willing to receive the word (see D&C 11:21) and then follow it. Simply stated, the purpose of general conference and of this priesthood session is fulfilled only if we are willing to act—if we are willing to change.*" Donald L. Hallstrom, "What Manner of Men?", *The Ensign*, May. 2014.

¹⁰ "A few question their faith when they find a statement made by a Church leader decades ago that seems incongruent with our doctrine. There is an important principle that governs the doctrine of the Church. The doctrine is taught by all 15 members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve. It is not hidden in an obscure paragraph of one talk. True principles are taught frequently and by many. Our doctrine is not difficult to find." Elder Neil L. Andersen, "Trial of Your Faith", *The Ensign*, Nov. 2012; This principle seems to govern even if that incongruent statement was made by Joseph Smith, or was taught as orthodox for many decades.

¹¹ Carol F. McConkie, "Live according to the Words of the Prophets", General Conference, October 2014

¹² Bruce R. McConkie, "Seven Deadly Heresies", BYU, June 01, 1980. Elder McConkie dismissed doctrines taught by Brigham Young, claiming they would prevent those who believed them from being saved.

¹³ D&C 6:2 2 "*Behold, I am God; give heed unto my word, which is quick and powerful, sharper than a two-edged sword, to the dividing asunder of both joints and marrow; therefore give heed unto my words.*"

Cutting Through Contradiction

I think it's worth stepping back and asking "what is a prophet?" If it is even remotely possible that our applying the title "prophet" so widely and casually in the last 65 years has skewed LDS understanding of what a prophet is, then perhaps it would be profitable to set aside those recent traditions and build our understanding from earlier sources. In discovering a new, or rather old, definition for the word, maybe we can re-ground our faith in some forgotten fundamental principles.

So what sources will we use? The scriptures were given by revelation from God, and were largely written by men who knew God personally and intimately. We are commanded to anchor our teachings in them.¹⁴ Joseph Smith's prophetic status grew from his direct contact with God, and his teaching was largely confined to what he knew from this personal experience. God vouched for Joseph's teachings, and we are still under command to receive them.¹⁵ Fortunately, these two collections of sources, the scriptures and Joseph Smith's recorded teachings, provide plenty of material about 'prophets'.¹⁶

Most of the recent traditions about prophets, mentioned earlier, arose as men tried to harmonize these original sources with their less impressive religious experience. They often did violence to the meaning of the original source as they bent it to their desired meaning, and teachers today repeat this violence as they pass on the tradition. It will be better for us to avoid this bending, and just extract meaning from the sources on their own terms. We will be asking *what do the scriptures restored by Joseph Smith, Joseph's recorded teachings, and other scriptures, actually teach us about prophets? Further, how does this view of prophets inform our understanding of Latter-day Saint history and doctrine since Joseph?* For those who believe Joseph Smith it will be an exercise in reconnecting our doctrine with the founder of our religion. For those who don't believe him, it may be the first time they have approached Joseph Smith's teachings on Joseph's own terms. They may find that they had only viewed Joseph Smith's scriptures and teachings through the correlated lens. At least now they will understand Joseph enough to accept or reject what he actually taught, rather than merely rejecting what others *claim* he taught. It will be worthwhile for everyone to give Joseph a fair hearing.

We only need to lay aside our traditions temporarily. If the current traditions of the Latter-day Saints are consistent with the scriptures and Joseph's teachings, then we will get those traditions back with additional support. If they are not consistent, however, then we should be happy to let the truth demolish our traditions, so that we can move from unbelief to belief.¹⁷ False traditions will all crumble

¹⁴ D&C 84:54-58; D&C 42:12

¹⁵ DC 21:1-9

¹⁶ There are many good resources for those inclined to read what Joseph taught. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, edited by Joseph Fielding Smith, collects many documents but obscures the original sources by attempting to combine different people's accounts of a sermon into one narrative. *The Words of Joseph Smith*, by Ehat and Cook, presents separate transcriptions of the sources, but is limited to Joseph's Nauvoo teachings. The Book of Abraham Project's website has a more comprehensive collection of Joseph's words, with each source for a sermon presented in a column parallel to the other sources. It is my favorite place to read Joseph's words, and is found at <http://www.boap.org/LDS/Parallel>. Getting closer to the original sources lets readers sense the personality of the various note-takers and transcribers, and better discern Joseph's actual intent. The fact that the record keepers did not always capture Joseph's exact words is not grounds for dismissing the whole body of records. Between them all, they captured a clear, consistent body of doctrines, all the more remarkable because of how different those doctrines are from what the note-takers themselves would later teach. It is only our modern ability to collect and publish these records which allows them to speak in unison, highlighting the contrast between Joseph's teachings and the things his successors would claim he taught.

¹⁷ Unbelief often consists of belief in false traditions. Unbelief darkens our minds and keeps us from coming to Christ: Helaman 15:15; Ether 4:13; D&C 84:54-55

to dust, some sooner, some later. We will be much better off at the day of crumbling if we have previously allowed those traditions to fall away, and have rooted our beliefs in enduring truth.¹⁸

First Principles

When studying any gospel principle, it helps to go back to the beginning to see how things worked for Adam and Eve. What saved them will also save us, because the path to God is eternal.¹⁹ Adam and Eve learned the gospel unencumbered by 3000 years of Judaism, 2000 years of Catholicism, 500 years of Protestantism, and 170 years of post-Joseph Smith Mormonism, all filtered through 60 years of LDS doctrinal correlation. As a mental exercise, we can set aside all of our traditions, place ourselves in the shoes of the earliest generations of man, and learn the gospel with fresh eyes (as we are invited to do in the Temple, for instance).

Mankind was shut out from God's presence. God wanted them to return. Alma lays out the plan of salvation presented to Adam and Eve in his sermon on salvation and priesthood beginning in Alma 12:

33 But God did call on men, in the name of his Son, (this being the plan of redemption which was laid) saying: If ye will repent, and harden not your hearts, then will I have mercy upon you, through mine Only Begotten Son;

34 Therefore, whosoever repenteth, and hardeneth not his heart, he shall have claim on mercy through mine Only Begotten Son, unto a remission of his sins; and these shall enter into my rest.

35 And whosoever will harden his heart and will do iniquity, behold, I swear in my wrath that he shall not enter into my rest.

This is the simplest expression of the plan of salvation, and is Alma's retelling of the events found in Moses 5:

6 And after many days an angel of the Lord appeared unto Adam, saying: Why dost thou offer sacrifices unto the Lord? And Adam said unto him: I know not, save the Lord commanded me.

7 And then the angel spake, saying: This thing is a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father, which is full of grace and truth.

8 Wherefore, thou shalt do all that thou doest in the name of the Son, and thou shalt repent and call upon God in the name of the Son forevermore.

9 And in that day the Holy Ghost fell upon Adam, which beareth record of the Father and the Son, saying: I am the Only Begotten of the Father from the beginning, henceforth and forever, that as thou hast fallen thou mayest be redeemed, and all mankind, even as many as will.

¹⁸ D&C 1:38

¹⁹ Equally helpful for minimalists is the other side of that coin: any principle that was unnecessary for Adam and Eve's salvation cannot be necessary for ours. Of Adam, Joseph wrote "he was the first to hold the spiritual blessings, to whom was made known the plan of ordinances for the Salvation of his posterity unto the end." TPJS pg. 167

10 And in that day Adam blessed God and was filled, and began to prophesy concerning all the families of the earth, saying: Blessed be the name of God, for because of my transgression my eyes are opened, and in this life I shall have joy, and again in the flesh I shall see God.

Both of these scriptures lay out the same plan: *If you repent and call upon God in the name of the Son, then you will receive mercy, be redeemed, and enter into the rest of the Lord.* To be redeemed means to be brought back into the presence of God, which Adam intended to do “in the flesh.”²⁰ To enter into “the rest of the Lord” means to enter the fullness of his glory and see his face, which God always intends for his people to do in mortality.²¹ These simple statements should be read repeatedly until they sink in. This is the model of the gospel that should be the foundation of everything else we study. If it was good enough for Adam and Eve’s very first lesson then we should not shy away from teaching it to one another. If it formed the substance of Alma’s sermon to those wicked people, we should clearly and unambiguously invite all potential converts to repent and enter the presence of God while in mortality. It is not too sacred to speak of. It is basic. It is milk. Joseph Smith said it is “the first principle of the Gospel” to know that we can speak to God face to face.²² Yet how many Latter-day Saints really believe that God wants them to stand in His presence while still in mortality? This is not a blessing reserved for the elite, but is explicitly offered to “all mankind, even as many as will.”

Alma continues his sermon in Alma 13 to describe how this plan was taught and administered to people.

1 And again, my brethren, I would cite your minds forward to the time when the Lord God gave these commandments unto his children; and I would that ye should remember that the Lord God ordained priests, after his holy order, which was after the order of his Son, to teach these things unto the people.

From among the people living in those first generations, God chose some and personally ordained them to his order. Alma doesn’t say that men ordained these priests, though in most cases these men were first ordained by Adam.²³ Only God can induct a man into His order.²⁴ Why were these men chosen to teach, while others were chosen to be taught?

3 And this is the manner after which they were ordained—being called and prepared from the foundation of the world according to the foreknowledge of God, on account of their exceeding faith and good works; in the first place being left to choose good or evil; therefore they having chosen good, and exercising exceedingly great faith, are called with a holy calling, yea, with that holy calling which was prepared with, and according to, a preparatory redemption for such.

4 And thus they have been called to this holy calling on account of their faith, while others would reject the Spirit of God on account of the hardness of their hearts and blindness of their minds, while, if it had not been for this they might have had as great privilege as their brethren.

5 Or in fine, in the first place they were on the same standing with their brethren; thus this holy calling being prepared from the foundation of the world for such as would not

²⁰ Ether 3:13-14

²¹ D&C 84:19-24; Moroni 7:3

²² TPJS, pg. 345

²³ D&C 84:6-16, D&C 107:41-52

²⁴ D&C 84:40, JST Genesis 14:29

harden their hearts, being in and through the atonement of the Only Begotten Son, who was prepared—

These men were chosen because they exercised “exceedingly great faith” and chose “good.” Others were not called to this order only because they were hard hearted, blinded in their minds, and rejected the spirit of God. This order was unrelated to institutional leadership, because it was available to anyone who qualified. This priesthood did not come as a rite of passage for young men, or to the unprepared, or the unfaithful. In the language of D&C 121, this “holy calling” meant being “chosen”, not merely “called”. Callings and ordinations extended by men are always preparatory and conditional; this is even true of calls extended by Joseph Smith, as shown by the history of the first modern group of twelve apostles. Men joined the “holy order” spoken of by Alma only when the power of the atonement of Christ prepared them by redeeming them. This implies that they entered into the presence and the rest of the Lord as part of their qualifying. The next verse confirms that this is the case:

6 And thus being called by this holy calling, and ordained unto the high priesthood of the holy order of God, to teach his commandments unto the children of men, that they also might enter into his rest—

Only a man who has been saved could possibly lead others to salvation. Anybody can teach true things. Priests who have been ordained and called by inspiration, though not yet ordained by God to his holy order, can teach truth through study and prayer.²⁵ The spirit will confirm both their calling and the truths they teach to those who listen. Even if they are estranged from God and opposed to His work, they may occasionally prophesy.²⁶ But only a high priest with an open and familiar relationship with heaven can teach the principles of the gospel in a way that allows other people to exercise faith unto redemption. This is why God himself ordained priests after his holy order to administer the simple message first taught to Adam and Eve.

Few of Adam and Eve's children accepted their ministry, but those who did received the promised blessing of redemption. Recounting the events described in D&C 107:53-57, Joseph Smith said:

I saw Adam in the valley of Adam-ondi-Ahman. He called together his children and blessed them with a patriarchal blessing. The Lord appeared in their midst, and he (Adam) blessed them all, and foretold what should befall them to the latest generation.

This is why Adam blessed his posterity; he wanted to bring them into the presence of God. They looked for a city, "whose builder and maker is God." (Hebrews 11:10.) Moses sought to bring the children of Israel into the presence of God, through the power of the Priesthood, but he could not. In the first ages of the world they tried to establish the same thing; and there were Eliases raised up who tried to restore these very glories, but did not obtain them; but they prophesied of a day when this glory would be revealed.²⁷

The first men called to the holy order include Adam, Seth, Enos, Cainan, Mahalaleel, Jared, Enoch, Methuselah, and Noah. All of them knew God face to face.²⁸ After Adam there were many "Eliases" sent to "restore [the] very glories" that Adam offered to his posterity, and, as Joseph says, they were

²⁵ D&C 11:21 "...but first seek to obtain my word."

²⁶ John 11:47-53

²⁷ TPJS pg. 158

²⁸ D&C 107:53-54

typically unsuccessful.²⁹ It is illuminating to read the words of the many prophets in the scriptures in light of the fact that they, like Adam, wanted to bring people into God's presence.³⁰

The passages above outline a fundamental attribute of prophets, namely the "priesthood" to which they belong. It is so fundamental that Alma uses the term "priest" rather than "prophet" to describe these men in his sermon. Since we are temporarily laying aside our traditions, let's allow these passages to introduce the idea of priesthood to us as though for the first time. This priesthood, the fullest and truest priesthood a human being can receive, comes directly from God. It only comes to those he chooses because of "exceedingly great faith". While those priests can ordain others, that ordination will only be ratified and empowered once the ordainee has also been chosen by God. Only God can induct men into his order. In one sense, this "priesthood" was a brotherhood, communion, or fellowship with heaven, rather than a certificate of institutional authorization.

Of Noah's priesthood, Joseph Smith wrote:

The keys of this Priesthood consisted in obtaining the voice of Jehovah that He talked with him [Noah] in a familiar and friendly manner, that He continued to him the keys, the covenants, the power and the glory, with which He blessed Adam at the beginning³¹

The high priesthood of these men consisted in their obtaining the voice of Jehovah, speaking with him in a familiar and friendly manner, and receiving anew, each of them, all keys, covenants, power, and glory with which Adam had been blessed. Today we think of priesthood, keys, and covenants as things which can be passed man to man. If these things could be passed down from man to man, then Noah would have received them from men. Adam knew all of Noah's ancestors, and all of those men knew Noah. There was an unbroken line of succession. But this order cannot come by man, or the will of man. Their priesthood was brotherhood with God, community with God, and fellowship with God, and only God decides with whom he will fellowship.³² If Noah wanted the covenants God made with Adam, he had to commune with Jehovah and obtain them himself. Likewise if he wanted the keys, power, and glory. All who want the same salvation must do the same works, even if, like Noah, they live during the ministry of another prophet. In the same document which contains the preceding quote, Joseph wrote:

This, then, is the nature of the priesthood; every man holding the presidency of his dispensation, and one man holding the presidency of them all, even Adam.³³

The scriptures mentioning "dispensations" should be interpreted in light of the fact that Joseph intended "every man" to receive one, not just those Latter-day Saint teachers have termed "dispensation heads."³⁴

²⁹ Enoch and Melchizedek are the notable exceptions.

³⁰ Once the reader knows to look for it, the real goal of scriptural prophets is mentioned all over their writings. For instance Alma describes his ministry in Alma 36:24-26

"Yea, and from that time even until now, I have labored without ceasing, that I might bring souls unto repentance; that I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste; that they might also be born of God, and be filled with the Holy Ghost. Yea, and now behold, O my son, the Lord doth give me exceedingly great joy in the fruit of my labors; For because of the word which he has imparted unto me, behold, many have been born of God, and have tasted as I have tasted, and have seen eye to eye as I have seen; therefore they do know of these things of which I have spoken, as I do know; and the knowledge which I have is of God."

³¹ TPJS pg. 171, Taken from a manuscript which Joseph dictated and corrected, to be read publicly by Robert B. Thompson at the October 1840 general conference.

³² 2 Nephi 9:41

³³ *ibid*

These high priests weren't sent to demand fealty, subservience, or obedience from others. They didn't try to cultivate a following for themselves, inviting nobody to "follow" them. For them, priesthood was not a means to organize people into a religious institution with franchise rights on salvation, as neither salvation nor priesthood can be fully institutionalized. Priesthood was their relationship with God, a relationship that was real, personal, and familiar. Their purpose was simply to invite others into the rest of the Lord, allowing others to have the same brotherhood, community, fellowship, and therefore the same keys, covenants, power, and glory that they enjoyed.

Melchizedek and His People – A Prototype

Alma's sermon continues in Alma 13 to describe Melchizedek as the epitome of this order:

17 Now this Melchizedek was a king over the land of Salem; and his people had waxed strong in iniquity and abomination; yea, they had all gone astray; they were full of all manner of wickedness;

His story is especially useful for us, because we also live in a time of wickedness. We are surrounded by rampant disobedience, and by a tangle of religious traditions that obscure the simplicity and clarity of the doctrine taught in Alma 12 and 13. In most cases, it is our own wickedness, disobedience, and abominations that cause us the most trouble. Melchizedek, in a similar situation, rose above the confusion:

18 But Melchizedek having exercised mighty faith, and received the office of the high priesthood according to the holy order of God, did preach repentance unto his people. And behold, they did repent; and Melchizedek did establish peace in the land in his days; therefore he was called the prince of peace, for he was the king of Salem; and he did reign under his father.

19 Now, there were many before him, and also there were many afterwards, but none were greater; therefore, of him they have more particularly made mention.

Melchizedek found himself redeemed and empowered to do God's work in a time of wickedness. He happened to be a king, but he could have easily been a tentmaker like Paul, a fisherman like Peter, or the son of an idol-carver, like Abraham³⁵. God tends to use such "weak things" to demonstrate his superiority over men's perceived wisdom and power.³⁶

Joseph Smith's translation of Genesis 14 elaborates on Melchizedek and his order:

26 Now Melchizedek was a man of faith, who wrought righteousness; and when a child he feared God, and stopped the mouths of lions, and quenched the violence of fire.

³⁴ For instance, Joseph used Abel as an example of a man who received a dispensation and its attendant priesthood and keys (TPJS pg. 171). Mainstream LDS thought would suggest that Abel should have just asked his father Adam for keys and priesthood, since he lived in Adam's dispensation. Since priesthood means fellowship with God, and we only receive eternal life as we know God personally (John 17:3), each exalted person must receive their own dispensation of priesthood.

³⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_and_the_Idol_Shop

³⁶ D&C 1:19

27 And thus, having been approved of God, he was ordained an high priest after the order of the covenant which God made with Enoch,

Melchizedek's actions show us what all high priests must do to enter the same order. He was a man of faith ("mighty faith" according to Alma) who wrought righteousness and worked miracles. Because of this faith he was "approved of God." In other words, he was chosen or elected. Only after being approved could Melchizedek become a high priest in the holy order.

28 It being after the order of the Son of God; which order came, not by man, nor the will of man; neither by father nor mother; neither by beginning of days nor end of years; but of God;

29 And it was delivered unto men by the calling of his own voice, according to his own will, unto as many as believed on his name.

Again, though Melchizedek had been ordained earlier in life under his father's hand, his ordination had to be ratified and reconfirmed by God's own voice. This order does not come by man. The text goes on to describe why the right to induct men into this order is reserved for God alone:

30 For God having sworn unto Enoch and unto his seed with an oath by himself; that every one being ordained after this order and calling should have power, by faith, to break mountains, to divide the seas, to dry up waters, to turn them out of their course;

31 To put at defiance the armies of nations, to divide the earth, to break every band, to stand in the presence of God; to do all things according to his will, according to his command, subdue principalities and powers; and this by the will of the Son of God which was from before the foundation of the world.

This order of the priesthood and the power that accompanies it are inseparable. God even swore an oath that "every one being ordained after this order and calling" would have the power described here. Unlike other orders of the priesthood, which can come by a man's ordination and carry no divine promise of power, God must be the gatekeeper of this order and power. He alone can judge who will "do all things according to his [God's] will". There can be no free-styling, no deviation from God's instructions.³⁷ This power, the sealing power, can only be given to those who are meek enough not to use it in the moments of passion, anger, frustration, torturous pain, and great sadness that are sure to attend their ministry. This power could never be passed man to man.³⁸ Every high priest must obtain it anew from heaven, as Noah had to do. When Elisha asked Elijah to give him this power, Elijah said that the power would only come if the heavens were opened to Elisha as they had been to him.³⁹ Elijah could not guarantee that this would happen, and could not pass on the sealing power himself. Joseph's translation of Genesis 14 continues, describing Melchizedek's ministry:

33 And now, Melchizedek was a priest of this order; therefore he obtained peace in Salem, and was called the Prince of peace.

³⁷ Helaman 10:4-11

³⁸ This is different than the "sealing power" typically spoken of in LDS discourse, which is simply the authorization by the president of the Church to perform rituals in an LDS temple. The only Church President who has claimed the power spoken of in this scripture was Joseph Smith.

³⁹ 2 Kings 2:9-10

34 And his people wrought righteousness, and obtained heaven, and sought for the city of Enoch which God had before taken, separating it from the earth, having reserved it unto the latter days, or the end of the world;

35 And hath said, and sworn with an oath, that the heavens and the earth should come together; and the sons of God should be tried so as by fire.

36 And this Melchizedek, having thus established righteousness, was called the king of heaven by his people, or, in other words, the King of peace.

“Peace in Salem” could only come because “Melchizedek was a priest of this order.” Only pure and true teaching can bring real peace. Melchizedek’s people heard truth untainted by error, and testimony untainted by pretense. They repented, wrought righteousness, and “obtained heaven”. They even sought to commune with the city of Enoch. They did not expect Melchizedek to be their permanent go-between with God. They obtained heaven themselves, and fully expected to fellowship with its inhabitants. Melchizedek must have been a great teacher. Meek as he was, he didn’t allow himself to become an idol to the people, their permanent oracle and mouthpiece for God. He is a model for any after him who are called to lead others to salvation. He is a model for us, the unredeemed, to know how to identify a true servant of God. His people show us what to do when such a messenger finally arrives.

Hyrum the Prophet

In 1841, Hyrum Smith was appointed Joseph’s successor and co-president, as well as Patriarch to the Church. In the revelation recorded in D&C 124, the Lord said:

94 And from this time forth I appoint unto him that he may be a prophet, and a seer, and a revelator unto my church, as well as my servant Joseph; 95 That he may act in concert also with my servant Joseph;

In order to qualify him for his new prophetic calling, Hyrum would need to be ordained and set apart, which Joseph did six days after the revelation was recorded. But, as with all prophets back to Adam, this earthly ordination was not enough:

...and that he shall receive counsel from my servant Joseph, who shall show unto him the keys whereby he may ask and receive, and be crowned with the same blessing, and glory, and honor, and priesthood, and gifts of the priesthood, that once were put upon him that was my servant Oliver Cowdery;

96 That my servant Hyrum may bear record of the things which I shall show unto him, that his name may be had in honorable remembrance from generation to generation, forever and ever.

To serve as a prophet to the church, Hyrum would need to be shown keys whereby he could ask and receive blessings. We can understand this as a reference to the ritual pattern now contained in the Endowment ceremony, a pattern Joseph began to communicate a little over a year later. Hyrum would then have to use those keys and receive “blessing, and glory, and honor, and

priesthood, and gifts of the priesthood.” Hyrum had to obtain these things from God, as had Melchizedek, because Hyrum’s calling would require him to hold the same sealing power.⁴⁰

In the process of obtaining these things, Hyrum would be shown things by the Lord, of which he would then be required to bear record as part of his prophetic calling.

The Church had been told that Joseph held the keys required to receive commandments and revelations for the Church, and that God would appoint a successor through Joseph.⁴¹ It was understood that Hyrum was this successor, as Brigham Young said several months after Joseph’s and Hyrum’s martyrdom:

"Did Joseph Smith ordain any man to take his place? He did. Who was it? It was Hyrum, but Hyrum fell a martyr before Joseph did."⁴²

For this reason, Brigham’s argument during the succession crisis in 1844 was that the 12 apostles should lead, rather than having a successor chosen and appointed. It was several more years before Brigham would move to assume the Presidency. Nobody demanded that he meet the preconditions which had been given in D&C 124 for Hyrum to serve as a true prophet and the President of the Church. Brigham never claimed to have obtained “blessing, and glory, and honor, and priesthood, and gifts of the priesthood” by asking and receiving from God, nor has any president after him.

The correlated LDS understanding of priesthood does not currently have a place for priesthood received directly from heaven.⁴³ Nor is there wide understanding of the fact that such priesthood MUST be received before a man is qualified to be a prophet. Our non-scriptural traditions about prophets have formed a screen through which we filter the scriptures, rearranging words and concepts to fit our preconceive notions. As a result, the great truths about Hyrum’s calling go unnoticed in millions of copies of the Doctrine and Covenants. D&C 124 like the scriptures quoted above, requires that we lay those traditions aside before we can perceive what it is saying.

Joseph Smith and Prophets

Joseph Smith’s recorded sermons and writings provide a commentary and elaboration on the scriptures he restored. They clarify his understanding of the words he used as he dictated revelations and translations. One thread running throughout these records is the importance of prophets obtaining the revelations described in the scriptures above:

Salvation cannot come without revelation, it is in vain for anyone to minister without it. ¶ No man is a minister of Jesus Christ, without being a Prophet. No man can be the minister of Jesus Christ, except he has the testimony of Jesus & this is the Spirit of Prophecy. Whenever Salvation has been administered it has been by Testimony. Men at the present time testify of Heaven & of hell, & have never seen either–& I will say that no man knows these things without this.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ D&C 124:124

⁴¹ D&C 28: ; D&C 43:4

⁴² Times & Seasons, October 15, 1844, Vol. 5, p. 683

⁴³ That is, aside from the few men officially recognized as “dispensation heads”

⁴⁴ Joseph Smith, July 1839, Willard Richards Pocket Companion. On the subject of the changing definitions of words, compare Joseph Smith’s use of the word “testimony” to its use in Latter-day Saint discourse today.

What kind of revelation must someone receive to testify that they “know” something, according to Joseph? Testimony of spiritual things requires firsthand knowledge, including sight.⁴⁵ Joseph condemned the practice of testifying of heaven and hell without seeing either. For the same reason, he condemned men for attempting to be ministers of Jesus Christ, without being prophets, or without obtaining “the testimony of Jesus”. It is so important that “salvation cannot come” without it.

Why can't salvation come without revelation? Joseph explains:

Whenever there has been a righteous man on earth unto whom God revealed his word & gave power & authority to administer in his name. And whare there is a Priest of God, A minister who has power & Authority from God to administer in the ordinances of the Gospel & officiate in the Priesthood of God, there is the kingdom of God...

*whare there is no kingdom of God there is no salvation. What Constitutes the Kingdom of God Whare there is a Prophet a priest or a righteous man unto whom God gives his oracles there is the Kingdom of God, & whare the oracles of God are not there the Kingdom of God is not.*⁴⁶

Joseph is simply restating D&C 84:19-22. A man could only administer salvation to others if he had an open channel of communication from God for himself. Latter-day Saints today would do well to reflect on the connection between personally receiving revelation and having full authority to administer in the ordinances of the Gospel. The temple ceremony has preserved this principle even though it has been completely lost from our discourse.

Latter-day Saints occasionally quote the statement by Joseph, which he wrote in answer to the question “Do you believe Joseph Smith, Jun., to be a Prophet?”:

*Yes, and every other man who has the testimony of Jesus. For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.—Revelation, 19:10th verse.*⁴⁷

What is “the testimony of Jesus”? Is it simply “having a testimony” in the sense so often used by Latter-day Saints? While this is the interpretation favored by the Encyclopedia of Mormonism⁴⁸, and perhaps by the imaginations of many of the Saints, it is not what Joseph meant:

*There are three grand Keys to unlock the whole subject. First what is the knowledge of God, Second what is it to make our calling and election sure. Third and last is how to make our calling and election sure. Answer, it is to obtain a promise from God for myself that I shall have Eternal life. that is the more sure word of prophycy... to be sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, that is the testimony of Jesus.*⁴⁹

Obtaining the testimony of Jesus means that Jesus has testified to you. Note how often Christ bears testimony of himself when he appears.⁵⁰ Note also that being sealed by the holy spirit of promise, or having one's calling and election made sure, means that Jesus will be bearing witness that the person is accepted.⁵¹ As Melchizedek was “approved of God”, so will all prophets be. This is a “more sure

⁴⁵ This agrees with the requirements for testimony under Jewish law, or *halakah*.

⁴⁶ Joseph Smith, January 22, 1843, Wilford Woodruff Journal

⁴⁷ TPJS, pg. 119

⁴⁸ <http://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Prophet>

⁴⁹ Joseph Smith, May 21, 1843, James Burgess Notebook

⁵⁰ Ether 3, 3 Nephi 11, DC 93:1

⁵¹ D&C 88:3-4; D&C 132:49-50; LoF 6:7-8; JST Gen 14:27; Hebrews 11:4-5

word of prophecy” to the person, a positive promise that they will inherit eternal life. When such a person ministers to an unredeemed people, he or she is like “a light that shineth in a dark place.”⁵²

Why is this sealing, “the testimony of Jesus,” needed for prophetic ministry?

Then having this promise sealed unto them it was as an anchor to the Soul Sure & Steadfast though the thunders might roll & lightnings flash & earthquakes Bellow & war gather thick around yet this hope & knowledge would support the soul in evry hour of trail [trial] trouble & tribulation

Then Knowledge through our Lord & savior Jesus Christ is the grand Key that unlocks the glories & misteries of the Kingdom of heaven....⁵³

The knowledge that he will be saved becomes an anchor to the soul so that the prophet could endure anything required. For every Melchizedek, whose story ends in Zion, there are many Abinadis, Lehis, and Isaiahs, who are ignored, mocked, beaten, cast out, excommunicated, abandoned, tortured, sawn asunder and burned. There are many who labor for a lifetime among a people who are devout and religious but who will not develop the faith to rise up, build Zion, and enter into the rest of the Lord. This was the fate of both Moses and Joseph Smith.

In addition to fortifying them for hardship, having the covenant of life with Christ and knowledge of Him “is the grand key that unlocks the glories and mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.” These are the very things to which any true prophet desires to lead people. They cannot possibly offer what they do not have the key to unlock.

Earlier we read Joseph’s statement about the priesthood held by the patriarchs:

the Keys of this priesthood consisted in obtaining the voice of Jehovah that he talked with him in a familiar and friendly manner, that he continued to him the Keys, the Covenants, the power and the glory with which he blessed Adam at the beginning.⁵⁴

All prophets were members of this same high priesthood, their membership only coming by God’s approval and ordination:

All the Prophets had the Melchizedeck Priesthood and [were] ordained by God himself.⁵⁵

This must always be the case with true prophets.

The Secret Council of YHWH

Amos 3:7 is familiar to many returned missionaries as a proof text that demonstrates that God always calls prophets: “Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets.”

⁵² 2 Peter 1:19

⁵³ Joseph Smith, May 14, 1843, Wilford Woodruff Journal

⁵⁴ Joseph Smith, written instruction on Priesthood, October 1840

⁵⁵ January 5, 1841, William Clayton Record

Less familiar is the understanding that the hebrew word *sôd*, here translated “secret”, does not simply refer to secret information about God’s forthcoming works. There is evidence that it refers to the secret council of God, a convocation consisting of God, the heavenly host, and, when invited, an earthly prophet.

From William Hamblin:

In its broader sense the Hebrew term sôd (סוד) means a confidential discussion, a secret or plan, a circle of confidants, or council. Nearly all scholars now agree that sôd, when used in relationship to God, refers to the heavenly council/sôd of God, which humans may sometimes visit to learn divine mysteries or obtain a prophetic message to deliver to humankind. The celestial members of this council are variously called the “host of heaven” (1 Kings 22:19), “gods” or “sons of God” (Ps. 82:1, 6), or “Holy Ones.” Sôd can refer to either the divine council itself or to the deliberative secret results of that council—that is the secret plans of the council—which a prophet is sometimes permitted to learn or to reveal to humankind. Only those who are part of the divine sôd/council know the sôd/secret plan, and only those who are given explicit permission may reveal that sôd to humankind.⁵⁶

The scriptures contain many instances of prophets being invited into the heavenly council to receive, priesthood, knowledge, a message, and a prophetic commission.

The prophet Michaiah recorded his experience in this secret council in 1 Kings 22:19-23. Isaiah 6 records Isaiah’s ascent to the throne room in the heavenly holy of holies. He received a cleansing ordinance from the heavenly hosts, and a mandate to reveal certain information to mankind. Lehi saw the council of God, again in the heavenly throne room. He was given a book to read and was commissioned to bear testimony of what he had seen and heard.⁵⁷ Enoch was ceremonially clothed with glory, talked with God face-to-face, and learned of God’s secret plans for the future of humanity.⁵⁸

Jeremiah had strong words against those in his time who claimed the title “prophet” without having stood in the divine council, and for the people who followed them. They preached vain and flattering doctrines. They were unable to teach unadulterated because they had not stood in YHWH’s council. He report’s YHWH’s words in Jeremiah 23:

13 And I have seen folly in the prophets of Samaria; they prophesied in Baal, and caused my people Israel to err.

14 I have seen also in the prophets of Jerusalem an horrible thing: they commit adultery, and walk in lies: they strengthen also the hands of evildoers, that none doth return from his wickedness: they are all of them unto me as Sodom, and the inhabitants thereof as Gomorrah.

15 Therefore thus saith YHWH of hosts concerning the prophets; Behold, I will feed them with wormwood, and make them drink the water of gall: for from the prophets of Jerusalem is profaneness gone forth into all the land.

⁵⁶ <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/the-sod-of-yhwh-and-the-endowment/>

⁵⁷ 1 Nephi 1:7-18

⁵⁸ Moses 7:3-4; compare to 2 Enoch 22:8-10 “The LORD said to Micahel, Take Enoch, and extract (him) from the earthly clothing. And anoint him with the delightful oil, and put (him) into the clothes of glory. . . . And I gazed at myself, and I had become like one of the glorious ones, and there was no observable difference.”

16 Thus saith YHWH of hosts, Hearken not unto the words of the prophets that prophesy unto you: they make you vain: they speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of YHWH.

17 They say still unto them that despise me, YHWH hath said, Ye shall have peace; and they say unto every one that walketh after the imagination of his own heart, No evil shall come upon you.

18 For who hath stood in the [sôd] of YHWH, and hath perceived and heard his word? who hath marked his word, and heard it?...

These “prophets” committed adultery, which can be literal adultery (in the form of infidelity or unauthorized plural marriage) or figurative adultery (centering one’s trust and faith in anything but God); they walked in lies, teaching things that were not true, and giving the impression that they knew things they did not truly know; they strengthened the hands of evildoers, favoring the rich and wicked economically and socially rather than obtaining and delivering a message of repentance from God. Prophesying without having stood in YHWH’s council is the same as prophesying “in Baal.” Since no man can serve two masters, and these prophets are not directed personally by YHWH, they must be getting their orders from below.

God commands the people not to hearken to these unqualified men, warning that their preaching makes their hearers vain. Their teachings come from their own heart, where true prophets strictly confine their message to the scope specifically outlined for them by God.

These blind prophets flatter wicked people, claiming that YHWH himself has proclaimed them chosen. Flattering doctrines convince multitudes, while the much needed message of repentance offends all but the few who will bear it. At the same time Jeremiah was writing these criticisms, there were many like Laman and Lemuel who would bear fervent testimony that the church at Jerusalem was righteous and had not gone astray.⁵⁹ They perceived the messages of true prophets as bitter, judgmental, and critical of beloved and obviously righteous church leaders.⁶⁰ To them, the instructions of true prophets appeared to lead people astray from the traditions and institution with which they were familiar. In their minds, the system was established by God, so only a dangerous false prophet would contradict it or defy its leaders.

Jeremiah further reports the words of YHWH:

21 I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran: I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied.

22 But if they had stood in my (sôd), and had caused my people to hear my words, then they should have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their doings.

As Melchizedek could only establish peace in Salem because he knew God, these prophets could not teach righteousness because they didn’t know God. Those who truly know God can lead others to him. Those who don’t, can’t, even if they mean well and are kind-hearted. There is no substitute for firsthand knowledge. Sadly, ignorance will not stop most people from attempting to lead. There will always be many well-meaning people willing to preach and lead, despite their lack of qualification.

⁵⁹ 1 Nephi 17:22

⁶⁰ This was the reaction of King Noah’s priests, in Mosiah 12:13-15

Through Joseph Smith the Lord delivered a warning similar to Jeremiah's, promising the saints that the final cleansing in the last days would begin with those among them who pretended to know God:

D&C 112:23 Verily, verily, I say unto you, darkness covereth the earth, and gross darkness the minds of the people, and all flesh has become corrupt before my face.

24 Behold, vengeance cometh speedily upon the inhabitants of the earth, a day of wrath, a day of burning, a day of desolation, of weeping, of mourning, and of lamentation; and as a whirlwind it shall come upon all the face of the earth, saith the Lord.

25 And upon my house shall it begin, and from my house shall it go forth, saith the Lord;

26 First among those among you, saith the Lord, who have professed to know my name and have not known me, and have blasphemed against me in the midst of my house, saith the Lord.

The Prophetic and the Priestly

The common thread in the material we've reviewed so far is the importance placed on entering the presence of the Lord. Prophets must do it so they can administer the gospel by testimony. Their message invariably includes a call for everyone to repent, arise, and be redeemed. Adam gave this invitation to his children.⁶¹ Enoch did the same for the people in his day.⁶² Noah taught the same thing, that the people of his day needed to repent, be baptized, and receive the Holy Ghost so they could have "all things made manifest" to them.⁶³ Melchizedek, as we noted earlier, succeeded in convincing a wicked people to repent and obtain heaven. All true prophets preached the same message and are part of the same high priesthood. The people either repented and rose up to know God, or they refused, failed, and dwindled or were destroyed. This pattern continued down to Moses.

In D&C 84, we get a remarkable lesson on this pattern coupled with a story about Moses to illustrate the principle. First, the Lord reiterates the purpose of the High Priesthood:

19 And this greater priesthood [the priesthood of Adam, the patriarchs, and Moses] administereth the gospel and holdeth the key of the mysteries of the kingdom, even the key of the knowledge of God. 20 Therefore, in the ordinances thereof, the power of godliness is manifest.

21 And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh; 22 For without this no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live.

A member of this priesthood holds the key of the knowledge of God. The power of Godliness can be manifest to him, and thus he will see the face of God the Father and afterwards continue living on the

⁶¹ Moses 5:10-12, D&C 107:42-49, 53-54

⁶² Moses 6:27, 67-68, Moses 7:23

⁶³ Moses 8:24

earth. He can be empowered to extend the invitation to others. The commandments, instructions, and rituals by which he does this are known as “the ordinances” of the priesthood.⁶⁴

If one is not a member of this holy order, the power of godliness cannot be manifest to him no matter how many ceremonies he participates in. He cannot see the face of God in mortality. He can direct people to scriptures containing true prophets’ testimonies, but has no authority to administer all the ordinances of the priesthood needed to facilitate other people’s redemption. He doesn’t have the knowledge required, nor the connection with God that would allow him to obtain that knowledge.

The next verses offer a case study in these principles:

23 Now this Moses plainly taught to the children of Israel in the wilderness, and sought diligently to sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God;

Moses’ mission and message were no different than the prophets before him. They all sought diligently to sanctify others so that they, too, could behold the face of God. Note that Moses’ goal meant that he was not intended to be the sole representative of the high priesthood. He was attempting to induct all of Israel into that order, the men as priests, the women as priestesses.

24 But they hardened their hearts and could not endure his [God's] presence; therefore, the Lord in his wrath, for his anger was kindled against them, swore that they should not enter into his rest while in the wilderness, which rest is the fulness of his glory.

When such an invitation is rejected, it must be withdrawn for a time before it can be re-extended. The invitation to repent is open to all *individuals* at all times, but the invitation to build a Zion society can be withdrawn for generations in response to that society’s refusal to rise up.⁶⁵

25 Therefore, he took Moses out of their midst, and the Holy Priesthood also;

26 And the lesser priesthood continued, which priesthood holdeth the key of the ministering of angels and the preparatory gospel;

27 Which gospel is the gospel of repentance and of baptism, and the remission of sins, and the law of carnal commandments,

This marked the first time that any authority had been detached from the holy order of God, to be perpetuated separately. Moses organized the Levites as a priestly class, to preserve and pass on this authority, to perform ordinances, and to preach repentance and the law of carnal commandments. The continuation of the Gospel of repentance meant that every Israelite has a permanent invitation to repent and choose to serve God. They had the necessary information to begin that journey. They had among them the authority to baptize, which carries the eternal promise of the Holy Ghost.⁶⁶ This lesser covenant also carried the promise that angels could come and minister to them. The angels’ job is to call people to repentance, cause men to behold God’s glory, and otherwise do the work of preparing men to covenant personally with God.⁶⁷ In this way, no blessing was withheld from any individual

⁶⁴ Current Latter-day Saint discourse falsely limits the definition of “ordinances” to the few rituals which we currently perform. In Joseph’s language and in the scriptures, the word ‘ordinance’ means ‘ordained path or action’, and includes all commandments, instructions, and rituals on the path back to God.

⁶⁵ 2 Nephi 26:33; D&C 124:32; An invitation consists of God sending a high priest with an command to repent and arise, and authority to organize a covenant people

⁶⁶ 1 Nephi 10:17-19, 2 Nephi 31:12, JSH 1:73

⁶⁷ Alma 12:29, Moroni 7:31, also depicted ritually in the LDS temple endowment ceremony

Israelite. Rather than destroy the whole people for their rebellion, Moses and God created an institution that would preserve the doctrine and authority needed for a soul to be redeemed. That way, even though the punished generation had to die in the wilderness, their children and grandchildren could receive the same invitation encapsulated in doctrines and ceremonies.

Many in the next 1200 years did accept that invitation, rising up to know God. Therefore this way of preserving the invitation was at least somewhat effective. Even when “the word of the Lord was precious (rare)...and there was no open vision,” Samuel could be redeemed and called as a prophet.⁶⁸ Even when the people throughout Israel subjected themselves to uninspired preachers, Jeremiah, Lehi, Ezekiel, and many other men could enter God’s presence and be sent to preach repentance.

The problem with Moses’ solution is that there was almost always conflict between the lesser priestly authority of the Levites and the high priestly authority of the prophets. Despite generations spent without contacting God, the priests had a legitimate line of authority running back to Moses. They had a commission to pass on that priesthood, and authority to oversee the institution created by Moses. As Jesus said of the Chief Priests of his day, they “sit in Moses’ seat.”⁶⁹ However, any Israelites who were redeemed had a separate, higher authority reckoning from God himself. As Joseph pointed out:

All the Prophets had the Melchizedeck Priesthood and was ordained by God himself.⁷⁰

This authority was independent of and ungoverned by the priests and their institution. It was rare that these prophets were part of the Levite priestly hierarchy, like Samuel the High Priest, Jeremiah, or Ezekiel. Most were like Lehi, a Manassehite; or Isaiah, Amos, Habakkuk, Joel, Micah, Obadiah, Zechariah, and Zephaniah, all of Judah. These men had no claim on priestly office within their religious institution.

Both the Levites and the prophets had priesthood reckoning from God. The Levites were inducted only into that portion of the priesthood that can be passed man to man. The prophets had received a fullness. The prophets did not interfere with the stewardship of the priests, and were often sent to command the priests to repent and do their duty. Until John the Baptist, none were sent to wrest control from the priests. The institutional hierarchy rarely received the ministry of the prophets favorably, always interpreting their presence as a threat to Aaronic priestly authority. Priestly hierarchies tend to forget the true purpose of the gospel (bringing men into God’s presence), and instead claim that salvation comes through religious rituals.⁷¹ In Matthew 21, Christ tells this history in a parable:

33 ¶Hear another parable: There was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country: 34 And when the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, that they might receive the fruits of it.

35 And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again, he sent other servants more than the first: and they did unto them likewise.

⁶⁸ 1 Samuel 3

⁶⁹ Matthew 23:2

⁷⁰ January 5, 1841, William Clayton Record

⁷¹ Mosiah 13:27-32; Latter-day Saints can detect this trend in our own Church, as “ordinances” now only describe our ceremonies and rituals, and the importance of entering God’s presence in this life is minimized.

37 But last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son. 38 But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance. 39 And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him. 40 When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen? 41 They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons.

This is the conflict between the “prophetic” and the “priestly”. From the priests’ point of view, the prophets have no authority, are offensive and unruly, and threaten the stability of the existing power structure. The priests have a conviction that they are doing God’s work, even while they cast out God’s messengers. Men and women who confuse institutional power for God’s power can only see true prophets as unrighteous, and will invariably persecute them.⁷² This idolatry is the state of “almost all men”, but is alien to prophets, almost invariably meek and humble men and women with no concern for worldly honors and influence.⁷³ They only seek to render the fruit of the vineyard to the Lord, inviting people to repent and be redeemed.

This was the history of Israel after Moses. It also describes the history of the gentile Church after Christ and the Apostles. We see this conflict throughout the Book of Mormon (Abinadi and Noah, Alma and the Amalackiahites, Alma and the Zoramites, etc etc). Stable, self-perpetuating religious institutions only exist in the wake of the failure to achieve Zion. The “truth” and “life” of a Church depend on its members entering into the high priesthood, where people speak with God face to face and receive instructions from him. Every other institution is in some degree of apostasy, and its hierarchy will always fight true prophets.

Joseph Smith’s revealed additions to the parable of the husbandmen indicate that the tragic pattern of covenant Israel would repeat in the last days, this time among the Latter-day covenant gentiles:

JST Matthew 21:53 And the kingdom of God shall be taken from [Israel], and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof; (meaning the Gentiles.)

54 Wherefore, on whomsoever this stone shall fall, it shall grind him to powder. 55 And when the Lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, he will destroy those miserable, wicked men, and will let again his vineyard unto other husbandmen, even in the last days, who shall render him the fruits in their seasons.

56 And then understood they the parable which he spake unto them, that the Gentiles should be destroyed also, when the Lord should descend out of heaven to reign in his vineyard, which is the earth and the inhabitants thereof.

The gospel was taken from Israel and sent to the gentiles through the ministry of the ancient apostles (vs. 53). In the last days the gospel will return to the Israelites when the covenant Gentiles (the Latter-day Saints) repeat the behavior that caused the gospel to be taken from Israel.⁷⁴

Joseph Smith collided with an idolatrous group of chief priests just as ancient prophets did, not only with the priests of other denominations, but most violently with the chief priests of the Latter-day Saints. Keep in mind that D&C 121 was written by Joseph from a prison, he having been put there by

⁷² DC 121:34-40

⁷³ DC 121:41-46

⁷⁴ 3 Nephi 16:10-11 – The Latter-day Saints are the gentiles to whom the gospel has come in the last days. We and our chief priests are now in the position of the husbandmen of the parable.

the betrayal of other leaders of the Church. Some of those men, like the subjects of the Lord's criticism in Jeremiah 23, had been sustained as "prophets". Years later, Joseph would write:

But their has been a great difficulty in getting anything into the heads of this generation it has been like splitting hemlock knots with a Corn dodger for a wedge & a pumpkin for a beetle, Even the Saints are slow to understand I have tried for a number of years to get the minds of the Saints prepared to receive the things of God, but we frequently see some of them after suffering all they have for the work of God will fly to pieces like glass as soon as any thing Comes that is Contrary to their traditions, they Cannot stand the fire at all, How many will be able to abide a Celestial law & go through & receive their exhaltation I am unable to say but many are Called & few are Chosen.⁷⁵

Did Joseph's death somehow purge the saints of their attachment to their traditions? Or did these traditions survive, flourish, and spread all the more vigorously with Joseph absent? Do Latter-day Saints today have more or fewer incorrect traditions among us than the saints in Joseph's day, considering we've had 170 more years to develop them? What might these traditions include? Do we believe priesthood power is manifest in our communing with heavenly beings, or in the performance of religious rituals? We can measure our reliance on tradition by the feelings of fear, hurt, anger, and alienation we feel when a loved one rejects those traditions. Hugh Nibley commented on the interplay between the prophetic and priestly among us:

Unlike prophets, churchmen are the product of institutions. In the safety and permanence of institutions they put their trust. They resolutely oppose the prophets, whom they accuse of disturbing their repose and rocking the boat; and they cultivate in opposition a peculiar "spiritual" type of religion, detached, and unworldly, but not in the sense that the primitive Christians were spiritual, detached, and unworldly. You will recall that the earliest critics of the ancient Christians describe them as noisy, unwashed, seditious, uncooperative, overactive, unabashed in their behavior, and crass, coarse, physical, and literal in their doctrines of heaven and their expectations of blessedness.⁷⁶

Joseph Smith the Prophet

By the standards set forth above, Joseph Smith was most certainly a prophet. His first attempt at vocal prayer resulted in a theophany, seeing and conversing with God the Father, Jesus Christ, and "many angels."⁷⁷ He saw and heard many things which he never shared.⁷⁸

In the following years Joseph, like Alma,⁷⁹ King Benjamin,⁸⁰ and so many other prophets, received instructions from angels.⁸¹ The available history about the time period in which Joseph was acting under the angel Moroni's instruction demonstrates another hallmark of true prophets: their mission is confined very strictly to the instructions that they have received. Joseph very scrupulously followed the

⁷⁵ Joseph Smith, January 21, 1844, Wilford Woodruff Journal

⁷⁶ Nibley, *The World and the Prophets*, p. 175

⁷⁷ <http://josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision>

⁷⁸ JSH 1:20

⁷⁹ Alma 8:14-17

⁸⁰ Mosiah 3:2-4:1

⁸¹ JSH 1:30

angel's instructions, and always paid a heavy price when he didn't. His mother's memoirs, and those of others, record his great anxiety when he felt he'd deviated from his assignment. He didn't treat his earlier theophany or his experiences with the angel as a sign that he had free reign to begin a self-directed prophetic ministry. He, like Abraham, was primarily concerned with receiving and obeying specific instructions.⁸²

In the middle of the translation of the Book of Mormon, the Lord told Joseph that his mission would extend beyond mere translation:

5 Verily, I say unto you, that woe shall come unto the inhabitants of the earth if they will not hearken unto my words;

6 For hereafter you shall be ordained and go forth and deliver my words unto the children of men.

7 Behold, if they will not believe my words, they would not believe you, my servant Joseph, if it were possible that you should show them all these things which I have committed unto you.

8 Oh, this unbelieving and stiffnecked generation—mine anger is kindled against them.

9 Behold, verily I say unto you, I have reserved those things which I have entrusted unto you, my servant Joseph, for a wise purpose in me, and it shall be made known unto future generations;

10 But this generation shall have my word through you;

Likely while nearing the end of the translation in the summer of 1829, Joseph received a great revelation from God conferring the power and authority he would need in his ministry. The words used in that conversation were recorded years later in the collection of revelations constituting D&C 132:

45 For I have conferred upon you the keys and power of the priesthood, wherein I restore all things, and make known unto you all things in due time.

46 And verily, verily, I say unto you, that whatsoever you seal on earth shall be sealed in heaven; and whatsoever you bind on earth, in my name and by my word, saith the Lord, it shall be eternally bound in the heavens; and whosoever sins you remit on earth shall be remitted eternally in the heavens; and whosoever sins you retain on earth shall be retained in heaven.

47 And again, verily I say, whomsoever you bless I will bless, and whomsoever you curse I will curse, saith the Lord; for I, the Lord, am thy God.

48 And again, verily I say unto you, my servant Joseph, that whatsoever you give on earth, and to whomsoever you give any one on earth, by my word and according to my law, it shall be visited with blessings and not cursings, and with my power, saith the Lord, and shall be without condemnation on earth and in heaven.

⁸² Abraham 1:2; 2 Nephi 3:8

49 For I am the Lord thy God, and will be with thee even unto the end of the world, and through all eternity; for verily I seal upon you your exaltation, and prepare a throne for you in the kingdom of my Father, with Abraham your father.

Joseph's ministry would require "the keys and power of the priesthood" spoken of in verse 45, which would allow God to "restore all things, and make known to Joseph "all things in due time". This is a clear reference to the priesthood of Noah and Adam, of which Joseph said "*the Keys of this priesthood consisted in obtaining the voice of Jehovah that he talked with him in a familiar and friendly manner, that he continued to him the Keys, the Covenants, the power and the glory with which he blessed Adam at the beginning.*"

Joseph would certainly make use of the sealing power given in verse 46 and 47 as he instituted ordinances for others to follow and obtain the same blessings. The ordinances performed today by Latter-day Saints can only remain valid because they were instituted by Joseph using that power. Because of this decree, we can still obtain blessings by hearkening to Joseph's words, and still receive curses for disregarding them.⁸³

In verse 49 Joseph obtains the promise that would be an anchor to his soul through the trials he would have to face in the future: the covenant of eternal life. This, with the keys and power of the priesthood, would be "*the grand Key that unlocks the glories and mysteries of the Kingdom of heaven.*"⁸⁴ According to Joseph, this positive promise of eternal life is the "more sure word of prophecy" spoken of by Peter, which makes the recipient "a light that shineth in a dark place."⁸⁵ According to Peter, we would do well to take heed to such a light "until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts," and we receive the promise for ourselves.⁸⁶

As a high priest, Joseph was empowered to teach others the ordinances by which they could be redeemed as well, and his whole ministry was devoted to that purpose.⁸⁷ Joseph's sermons are full of pleading invitations for every saint to know God personally in this life and receive the promise of salvation. Willard Richards compiled notes from Joseph's 1839 sermon on John 14:

It is the privilege of the Children of God to come to God & get Revelation...

[verse 13] The Father could not be glorified in the Son [verse 13] on any other principle than we coming to God, asking, receiving, heavens open visions &c.--They are done away because of unbelief—

[verse 16] I will pray the father & he shall send you another Comforter. There is one Comforter [Holy Ghost] & another Comforter to abide with you forever, reach to things within the vail, know that you are Sealed. If you get it, it will stand by you forever. How is it obtained? Keep my commandments & I will pray &c.—

[verse 17] It is a privilege to view the Son of Man himself, he dwelleth with you & shall be in you, his spirit shall be in you. [verse 18] I will not have you comfortless, I will come to you, abide with you forever, Seal you up to Eternal life.

⁸³ D&C 21, D&C 84:54

⁸⁴ Joseph Smith, May 14, 1843, Wilford Woodruff Journal

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ 2 Peter 1:19

⁸⁷ D&C 67:10, D&C 76:114-118, D&C 84:44-48, D&C 88:67-68, D&C 93:1, D&C 97:15-17, D&C 101:38, D&C 124:24-28

[verse 19] Yet a little while & you shall see me no more, but ye see me.--
[verse 21] He that hath my commandments & keepeth them, he it is that loveth me &c.-- I will manifest myself to him. if he does not he has not told the truth. I will put promises in your hearts, that will not leave you that will Seal you up. We may come to the general assembly & church of the first born, Spirits of Just men made perfect, unto Christ. The innumerable company of Angels are those that have been resurrected from the dead. the Spirits of Just men made perfect are those without bodies. It is our privilege to pray for & obtain these things...

[verse 23] If a man love me he will keep my words, & my father will love him, & We both me & my father will take our abode with him. There are certain characters that walked with God, saw him, conversed about heaven &c.

[verse 26] but the comforter that I will send, (not the other comforter) shall teach you all things.--who?--He that loveth me &c--This shall bring all things to remembrance whatsoever things I have said unto you, he shall teach you until ye come to me & my father.

God is not a respecter of persons, we all have the same privilege. Come to God weary him until he blesses you &c--we are entitled to the same blessings, Jesus, revelations,

Just Men &--Angels &c. &c. not Laying again the doctrine of Christ go on unto perfection. Obtain that holy Spirit of promise--Then you can be sealed to Eternal Life.⁸⁸

These notes provide a glimpse of principles Joseph taught throughout his ministry: All of God's children have an equal privilege to obtain revelation, because God is "not a respecter of persons." The Father can't be glorified in the Son unless we come to him, asking for and receiving revelation, specifically visions and the opening of the heavens. These things are "done away because of unbelief," so if they are absent from our life we should work to correct our unbelief. We begin by receiving the first comforter, the Holy Ghost, who "shall teach you until ye come to me and my father." It is then Christ who comes to us and offers us his personal ministry and presence. This ministry and presence are "another Comforter," the Second Comforter. Joseph paraphrases Christ, saying "*I will not have you comfortless, I will come to you, abide with you forever, Seal you up to Eternal life.*" "If you qualify and Christ does not come to you," Joseph says, "he has not told the truth." Christ will not withhold his presence and ministry from someone who meets the conditions, because doing so would make him a liar. We may come to the general assembly and church of the firstborn (who are resurrected, exalted beings), to the spirits of just men made perfect (who are not yet resurrected, but are ministering spirits), and unto Christ himself. "*It is our privilege to pray for and obtain these things.*" "*Come to God and weary him until he blesses you.*"

Joseph taught that any expectation of being sealed to our spouse or to our forefathers in eternity depended on our making our calling and election sure here:

¶ The spirit of Elijah is that degree of power which holds the sealing power of the Kingdom to seal the hearts of the fathers to the children & of the children their fathers not only on earth but in Heaven both the living & the Dead to each other for they (the dead) cannot be made perfect without us Hebrews 11-40

⁸⁸ Joseph Smith, July 1839, Willard Richards Pocket Companion

¶ *This power of Elijah is to that of Elias what in the architecture of the Temple of God those who seal or cement the Stone to their places are to those who cut or hew the stones the one preparing the way for the other to accomplish the work. By this we are sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise ie Elijah*

¶ *To obtain this sealing is to make our calling and election sure which we ought to give all diligence to accomplish⁸⁹*

Only when we have made our calling and election sure, and are thus sealed by the Holy Spirit of Promise, do we obtain any promise of sealing as part of God's family.⁹⁰ Joseph's sermons teach that doctrine consistently, and repeatedly note that this is the actual manifestation of "the power of Elijah."

Faith comes by hearing the word of God through the testimony of the Servants of God, that Testimony is always attended by the Spirit of prophecy & Revelation...

¶ *St Paul exhorts us to make our Calling & Election shure. This is that sealing power spoken of by Paul in other places (See Eph I. 13.14. ... ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise. Which is the earnest of our inheritance, until the redemption of the purchased possession unto the praise of his glory.) That we may be sealed up unto the day of redemption, this principle ought. (in its proper place) to be taught, for God hath not revealed any thing to Joseph, but what he will make known unto the Twelve & even the least Saint may know all things as fast as he is able to--bear them. for the day must come when no man need say to his neighbor know ye the Lord for all shall know him (who Remain) from the least to the greatest, How is this to be done? It is to be done by this sealing power & the other comforter spoken of which will be manifest by Revelation.⁹¹*

Joseph's intent was for each saint to receive Christ's ministry as the Second Comforter, so that none would need to say to his neighbor "know ye the Lord," because they all would know him personally. Because he was a servant of God, a true prophet, his testimony had the power to build faith in others because it carried with it "the spirit of prophecy and revelation":

¶ *Now what is this other Comforter? It is no more or less than the Lord Jesus Christ himself & this is the sum & substance of the whole matter, that when any man obtains this last Comforter he will have the personage of Jesus Christ to attend him or appear unto him from time to time. & even he will manifest the Father unto him & they will take up their abode with him, & the visions of the heavens will be opened unto him & the Lord will teach him face to face & he may have a perfect knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of God, & this is the state & place the Ancient Saints arrived at when they had such glorious vision Isaiah, Ezekiel, John upon the Isle of Patmos, St Paul in the third heavens, & all the Saints who held communion with the general Assembly & Church of the First Born &c.*

¶ *The Spirit of Revelation is in connection with these blessings. A person may profit by noticing the first intimation of the Spirit of Revelation for instance when you feel pure Intelligence flowing unto you it may give you sudden strokes of ideas that by noticeing*

⁸⁹ Joseph Smith, March 10 1844, Franklin D. Richards "Scriptural Items"

⁹⁰ D&C 132:7, 18, 26. These references to "the Holy Spirit of Promise" are easy to overlook if one has not studied the teachings of the one who dictated the revelation, relying instead on traditions developed after Joseph's death.

⁹¹ Joseph Smith, June 17 1839, Willard Richards Pocket Companion

it you may find it. fulfilled the same day or Soon. (I.E.) those things that were presented unto your minds by the Spirit of God will come to pass and thus by learning the Spirit of God. & understanding it you may grow into the principle of Revelation. until you become perfect in Christ Jesus.⁹²

According to Joseph, the purpose of the first comforter is to lead us to the second. The first intimation of the spirit of revelation comes as sudden strokes of ideas, and as “pure intelligence” flowing into us, but they should grow into a full communion with Christ himself. The saints were not doomed to a lifetime of quiet whispering, as though great revelations were reserved for those with high church callings. The quiet voice should grow louder and clearer as it leads us into God’s presence.⁹³

Joseph’s recorded sermons preserve doctrines of Mormonism which have since been changed beyond recognition or altogether forgotten.⁹⁴ Recovering these truths is as simple as reading the records with a fresh pair of eyes, as a little child would read them.⁹⁵ Those willing to read Joseph’s words will find him teaching the same gospel of redemption as Adam, ceaselessly extending an invitation into God’s presence. They will read him teach and testify from firsthand experience with God as a high priest. They will also recognize that many of Joseph’s doctrines died with him.

It cannot be said that the Latter-day Saints accepted God’s invitation through Joseph. Though individuals around Joseph did enter God’s presence and commune with angels, most of the saints did not. It calls to mind Joseph’s description of the Israelites’ actions and their consequences:

When God offers a blessing or knowledge to a man, and he refuses to receive it, he will be damned. The Israelites prayed that God would speak to Moses and not to them; in consequence of which he cursed them with a carnal law.⁹⁶

The ancient Israelites understandably downplayed their rejection of Moses’ invitation. Nobody wants to believe their religious tradition is rooted in a failure like that. Eventually the mainstream tradition among the Israelites claimed that they were never expected to enter God’s presence, and that their highest duty was to gain a witness of Moses’ prophetic calling and follow the prophet.⁹⁷ They believed they should leave the mysteries alone and focus on following their leaders. They eventually edited their official history to conform to these false doctrines.⁹⁸ The official history of the saints has similarly been scrubbed and redacted to conform to our post-1844 doctrinal shifts. I have yet to read any official history (outside of the Doctrine and Covenants itself) that states the plain truths that 1) God (through Joseph) invited the saints into His presence just as He had invited the Israelites, and 2) The historical

⁹² *ibid*

⁹³ D&C 93:1, D&C 84:47-48

⁹⁴ For instance, compare Joseph’s teachings about Elijah to the Elijah doctrines formulated in the 1850s by Brigham Young and Orson Pratt. There is simply no overlap. Today, the Church teaches exclusively Young and Pratt’s doctrines, selectively quoting Joseph’s words to make it appear his teachings agree with those who came after. In Joseph’s system there was no mention of Elijah’s 1836 visitation; there was no claim that Elijah gave him the sealing power; there was no claim that Joseph had passed the sealing power on to anyone, nor even any claim that he *could* pass it on; there were to be sealings, but the sealings spoken of by Joseph could only be obtained by making one’s calling and election sure. Joseph taught many more doctrines, all of them differing markedly from the less-inspired men who would create LDS orthodoxy through the 19th and 20th centuries.

⁹⁵ Matthew 18:3, 3 Nephi 11:38

⁹⁶ TPJS P. 322

⁹⁷ Deut. 29:29

⁹⁸ Deut. 5:24-28; Deuteronomy was apparently produced to provide doctrinal justification for the correlation efforts of King Josiah and the priestly hierarchy of Jerusalem around the time of Lehi. Contrast their attitude with Nephi, who considered himself highly favored for knowing the mysteries, and you have a window into the religious controversy in Jerusalem in 600 b.c., which bleeds through in 1 Nephi.

record demonstrates that the saints did not enter God's presence, and were driven from Nauvoo and smitten, just as God promised they would be if they refused the invitation.⁹⁹

In many ways, Joseph's ministry parallels Moses'. Both gathered people and invited them into the presence of the Lord. Both sought diligently to sanctify the people so that the promise of redemption could be fulfilled, trying to teach clearly that the purpose of the priesthood was to bring them into God's presence. Both fought against the stubbornness, unbelief, and false traditions of their people. Both found few, if any, who accepted the Lord's invitation into his presence. Moses took only 70 of the Elders of Israel into the Lord's presence in Exodus 24, and far fewer of Joseph's contemporaries obtained that blessing. In that sense, both tried to establish Zion, but met with a degree of failure. In the face of that failure, both distributed a form of priesthood among their people that could be passed on among them. Both left this priesthood with a charge to teach the gospel of repentance, of carnal commandments, and to seek the ministry of angels. Both instituted a set of outward ordinances, including temple ordinances, to instruct their people in the future how to come unto Christ and be redeemed.

It would be appropriate for us to compare the children of Israel after Moses to the Latter-day Saints after Joseph Smith. We share the same tendency to confuse the priestly with the prophetic. We both mistakenly believe that our respective religious ceremonies have saving power, not understanding that true saving power is only found when we make personal contact with the divine. Their institutional and bureaucratic behavior is similar to ours. Their doctrinal controversies are similar to ours. Their priesthood was limited to Aaronic functions, and the priesthood in today's Church leaves the actual purpose of the higher priesthood both unfulfilled and unmentioned.¹⁰⁰ We can learn much in this comparison, but we must be prepared to find it highly unflattering.

Joseph Smith's Successors

The discussion so far has brought us to the point where we can begin to study history of the leaders of the Latter-day Saints after Joseph Smith in light of the scriptural model for prophets.

The revelations through Joseph Smith anticipate that, while Joseph was responsible to receive the revelations and commandments that would bind the Church by covenant ever after,¹⁰¹ he would not be the only apostle, prophet, or servant who would deliver God's word to the world.¹⁰²

When a quorum of twelve apostles was chosen and ordained by the three witnesses in 1835, Oliver Cowdery delivered a charge to them under the direction of Joseph Smith. Part of this charge explained that they were not yet qualified, and their ordination was not yet complete:

You have been indebted to other men, in the first instance, for evidence; on that you have acted; but it is necessary that you receive a testimony from heaven for yourselves; so that you can bear testimony to the truth of the Book of Mormon, and that you have seen the face of God. That is more than the testimony of an angel. When the proper time arrives, you shall be able to bear this testimony to the world. When you

⁹⁹ D&C 124:45-48; Our official histories all claim that the Nauvoo temple was completed and that it served the purpose Joseph envisioned. Both assertions are plainly contradicted by the historical documents. If a lie is told often enough, though, it becomes the only truth people will accept.

¹⁰⁰ D&C 107:18-20

¹⁰¹ D&C 21, D&C 28:2

¹⁰² D&C 1:4,14; D&C 18:9

bear testimony that you have seen God, this testimony God will never suffer to fall, but will bear you out; although many will not give heed, yet others will. You will therefore see the necessity of getting this testimony from heaven.

Never cease striving until you have seen God face to face. Strengthen your faith; cast off your doubts, your sins, and all your unbelief; and nothing can prevent you from coming to God. Your ordination is not full and complete till God has laid His hand upon you. We require as much to qualify us as did those who have gone before us; God is the same. If the Savior in former days laid His hands upon His disciples, why not in latter days?¹⁰³

After delivering this charge, Oliver took each member “separately by the hand”, and asked “Do you with full purpose of heart take part in this ministry, to proclaim the gospel with all diligence with these your brethren, according to the tenor and intent of the charge you have received?”¹⁰⁴ Each, in turn, bound himself by covenant to this charge.

These first ordinations reflect the scriptural principle discussed above, that an earthly ordination cannot confer the priesthood necessary to be an apostle. If firsthand knowledge was necessary for the apostles of old to bear testimony, it would be necessary now, because God is the same.

It is in the context of this understanding of “testimony” and of “apostles” that Joseph wrote:

The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it.¹⁰⁵

The testimony of those who know God personally has always been integral to God’s true religion, whenever that religion appears on the earth. To administer salvation to others, one must bear personal witness, by sight and touch, of the fact that Christ died, was buried, and rose again to ascend to heaven.¹⁰⁶ It was no different while Joseph was alive, and it would continue to be true if the apostles lived up to their charge, and the members responded to the invitation given to them. It is also with this understanding that Joseph said:

Salvation cannot come without revelation, it is in vain for anyone to minister without it.

¶No man is a minister of Jesus Christ, without being a Prophet. No man can be the minister of Jesus Christ, except he has the testimony of Jesus & this is the Spirit of Prophecy. Whenever Salvation has been administered it has been by Testimony. Men at the present time testify of Heaven & of hell, & have never seen either—& I will say that no man knows these things without this.¹⁰⁷

Only saved people can administer salvation to others. Joseph seems to have treated the twelve, from the time of their ordination as though they had already fulfilled the charge to complete their ordination.

¹⁰³ Oliver Cowdery, Pp. 195–96 in Roberts, B.H., ed. 1976. *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Vol. II.* 2nd ed

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*

¹⁰⁵ Joseph Smith Journal, May 8, 1838; Only such qualified “apostles” and “prophets” could possibly form the foundation of the Church, per Ephesians 2:20

¹⁰⁶ 3 Nephi 18:25

¹⁰⁷ Joseph Smith, July 1839, Willard Richards Pocket Companion

Perhaps it was a side-effect of Joseph's guilelessness, that he was often a poor judge of character, placing his trust in the untrustworthy. Or perhaps he understood that sustaining people, in a world where many are called but few chosen, means giving those who are called your full support *and* room to fail and make mistakes. Whatever the reason, less than a year later, at the dedication of the Kirtland house of the Lord, Joseph led the saints in the following sustaining vote:

I then... called upon the several quorums, and all the congregation of saints to acknowledge the Presidency as Prophets and Seers, and uphold them by their prayers, the all covenanted to do so by rising; I then called upon the quorums and congregation of saints to acknowledge the 12 Apostles who were present as Prophets and Seers and special witnesses to all the nations of the earth, holding the keys of the kingdom, to unlock it or cause it to be done among them; and uphold them by their prayers, which they assented to by rising . . . I next called upon the quorums and congregation of saints to acknowledge the Presidents of the seventys who act as their represent[at]ives as Apostles and special witnesses to the nations to assist the 12 in opening the gospel kingdom, among all people and to uphold them by their prayer's which they did by rising.¹⁰⁸

These men were sustained to those titles regardless of their lack of qualifying revelations. There is no record of any of them having seen the Savior in the eleven months since they were given their charge by Oliver Cowdery. While we cannot say with certainty that none of them completed their ordination, Brigham Young testified in the latter portion of his tenure as president that he never had. If one of them could be sustained by Joseph to hold the title "prophet," and serve the rest of his life in that capacity, all while never having met Joseph's qualifications for being a prophet, then they all could. Many of them would not serve long in their calling, however, and within four years almost half the quorum had been excommunicated.¹⁰⁹ This first group called to the twelve demonstrates that a call to leadership, even in the highest quorums of the Church does not guarantee a person's worthiness, faithfulness, or qualification. It also demonstrates that being sustained by the whole church as "prophets and seers" does not guarantee that they have been chosen and anointed by God personally. As Joseph observed during this mass disaffection among the twelve, "there are many called, but few are chosen."¹¹⁰

If it were appropriate to do an intensive survey of other people's spiritual experiences, or lack thereof, we could trace the recorded life of each member of the quorum of the twelve to determine if they ever bore the testimony of Christ that they covenanted to obtain and bear. So far we've seen that the sure witness is not a prerequisite to being called into the quorum, and that it does not come automatically to those who are called. An intensive survey is not needed to show that some among that group never did fulfill Oliver Cowdery's charge. The following statements were made decades later by Brigham Young:

"I have flattered myself, if I am as faithful as I know how to be to my God, and my brethren, and to all my covenants, and faithful in the discharge of my duty, when I have lived to be as old as was Moses when the Lord appeared to him, that perhaps I then may hold communion with the Lord, as did Moses. I am not now in that position, though I know much more than I did twenty, ten, or five years ago. But have I yet lived to the state of perfection that I can commune in person with the Father and the Son at

¹⁰⁸ Joseph Smith, March 27, 1836, Jesse Hitchcock Record, Joseph Smith Journal,

¹⁰⁹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chronology_of_the_Quorum_of_the_Twelve_Apostles_\(LDS_Church\)#1830s](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chronology_of_the_Quorum_of_the_Twelve_Apostles_(LDS_Church)#1830s)

¹¹⁰ D&C 121:34

my will and pleasure? No, though I hold myself in readiness that he can wield me at his will and pleasure. If I am faithful until I am eighty years of age, perhaps the Lord will appear to me and personally dictate me in the management of his Church and people. A little over twenty years, and if I am faithful, perhaps I will obtain that favour with my Father and God.”¹¹¹

“I think it likely that after a while I may be able to so humble myself and become like a little child, as to be taught more fully by the Heavens. Perhaps, when I am eighty years of age, I may be able to talk with some Being of a higher sphere than this. Moses saw the glory of God at that age, and held converse with better beings than he had formerly conversed with. I hope and trust that by the time I am that age I shall also be counted worthy to enjoy the same privilege.”¹¹²

Brigham died at age 77, and we have no record that he ever obtained communion with the Father and Son, despite his having covenanted to bear testimony of it if he did. The likelihood of a man meeting Joseph Smith’s criteria of a prophet does not necessarily increase with his seniority in the quorum of the twelve, or even as he serves as President for 30 years.

Decades later, Heber J. Grant wrote the following in his private journal:

“I have never prayed to see the Savior. I know of men – Apostles – who have seen the Savior more than once. I have prayed to the Lord for the inspiration of His Spirit to guide me, and I have told Him that I have seen so many men fall because of some great manifestation to them, they felt their importance, their greatness.”¹¹³

and wrote this in a letter:

“I know of no instance where the Lord has appeared to an individual since His appearance to the Prophet Joseph Smith.”¹¹⁴

It should be noted that seeing the savior, as John W. Taylor is reported to have done, is not necessarily the same thing as receiving the Second Comforter nor having His hands laid on your head to complete your ordination. “Seeing” or “beholding” the Savior can be many things other than a redeeming visitation, and receiving a visitation does not itself mean that person is sealed up to eternal life. It is also notable that if Heber J. Grant was aware in 1926 of Lorenzo Snow’s son’s claim that Lorenzo had been visited by Christ, he did not believe it.

President Young and President Grant demonstrate that it is not necessary for a man to have obtained “the testimony of Jesus”, which is the spirit of prophecy, to have the title “prophet” applied to him because of his Church office. They need not have obtained the “High Priesthood” from God directly, to serve in the office of “President of the High Priesthood of the Church.”¹¹⁵ The president doesn’t even have to obey Joseph Smith’s explicit instruction to ceaselessly seek and pray for that blessing.

¹¹¹ Brigham Young, age 62, JD v. 7, no. 37, p. 243, September 1, 1859

¹¹² Brigham Young, age 65, JD v. 10 no. 4, p. 23, 1862

¹¹³ The Diaries of Heber J. Grant, p. 468, probably referring to Matthias F. Cowley and John W. Taylor

¹¹⁴ Heber J. Grant, letter to Mrs. Claud Peery, April 13, 1926, typescript in Lester Bush papers, University of Utah Archives. It is unclear

¹¹⁵ D&C 107:65

As time went on, it seems that an understanding of the necessity of personally knowing God waned, even among the apostles themselves. Elder Joseph Fielding Smith wrote a letter to his missionary sons in 1948, having been an apostle for 38 years:

I sit and reflect at times, and in my reading of the scriptures, I think of the mission of our Lord, what he did for me, and when these feelings come upon me I say to myself, I cannot be untrue to him. He loved me with a perfect love, as he has done for all men, especially those who serve him, and I must love him with all the love I can, even if it is imperfect, which it should not be. It is wonderful. I did not live in the days of our Savior; he has not come to me in person. I have not beheld him. His Father and he have not felt it necessary to grant me such a great blessing as this. But it is not necessary. I have felt his presence. I know that the Holy Spirit has enlightened my mind and revealed him unto me, so that I do love my Redeemer, I hope, and feel it is true, better than everything else in this life. I would not have it otherwise. I want to be true to him. I know he died for me, for you and all mankind that we might live again through the resurrection. I know that he died that I might be forgiven my follies, my sins, and be cleansed from them. How wonderful is this love. How can I, knowing this, do anything else but love him, my Redeemer. I want my boys in the mission fields to feel this same way. I want my children and my grandchildren to feel that way, and never stray from the path of truth and righteousness.”¹¹⁶

Elder Smith’s love of the savior is palpable. He devoted nearly all of his 95 years to admirable service in the Church, including setting a standard for diligent and deep gospel study. He passed that legacy of study on to his son in law, Bruce R. McConkie, his grandson Joseph Fielding McConkie, and to countless saints. He always encouraged people to seek knowledge by personal revelation. However, he thought unnecessary the very experience that Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery charged the apostles to obtain. He did not think this experience was required to make his testimony a “special witness”. His “special witness” was special only by virtue of his holding the office of apostle, not special in nature. It was the same as anyone else’s spiritual conviction. It is more like Nephi’s spiritual witness that allowed him to “believe” the testimony of Lehi, who actually saw and knew, than it is like “knowledge” gained only by firsthand experience.¹¹⁷

We have to acknowledge that there are real differences between the scriptural use of the word ‘prophet,’ and its use among Latter-day Saints after Joseph Smith. Joseph and the scriptures he restored reserve the title for men who have obtained communion with God, thereby acquiring the High Priesthood, the ability bear a witness of firsthand knowledge, and the authority and directive to teach and invite others. Joseph applied the title ‘prophet’ to the apostles of his day under the explicit condition that they were to meet that standard. Latter-day Saints have routinely used it to describe their leaders in the last 65 years, regardless of their qualifying revelatory experiences. Even if all 3,000,000 people who were members during President Joseph Fielding Smith’s administration, in one united voice, expressed their solemn testimony that he was God’s prophet, it would not change the fact that he had not met the requirements laid down by Joseph Smith. It would only mean that he was sustained by common consent, and now had a duty to connect with God so that he could lead properly:

¹¹⁶ Joseph Fielding Smith Jr. and John J. Stewart, *The Life of Joseph Fielding Smith* (1972), 387–88; italics in original. This letter was reprinted in the recent Priesthood and Relief Society lesson manual.

¹¹⁷ 1 Nephi 2:16-17, 1 Nephi 10:17-19; we routinely use the words “I know” in situations where Nephi used “I believe.” Hebrew religious law requires that a “witness” must have seen an event with his eyes or heard it with his ears for his testimony to be binding or valid. Nephi demonstrates this same understanding when he distinguishes between “belief” and “knowledge.” Today’s LDS religious law sets a much lower bar for “testimony”.

D&C 107:91 And again, the duty of the President of the office of the High Priesthood is to preside over the whole church, and to be like unto Moses—

92 ... yea, to be a seer, a revelator, a translator, and a prophet, having all the gifts of God which he bestows upon the head of the church.

Becoming “a seer, a revelator, a translator, and a prophet” “like unto Moses” is a “duty” laid on the man who is sustained to be president, not a privilege guaranteed by the office. The failure of our teachers to distinguish clearly between the scriptural and cultural uses of the word “prophet”, and indeed the increasing tendency to ignore and willfully obscure the distinction, has led to a general ignorance among Latter-day Saints. We (collectively) do not understand what a prophet is; what the purpose of his mission is; what his mission looks, sounds, and feels like; and what his qualifying experiences must be. We do not understand that prophets, and all saved people, must obtain directly from God the portions of the priesthood that cannot be passed man to man (despite this being clearly stated in the Temple Endowment). We do not understand how any of the above facts explain the reliability of the doctrines taught in general conference, in our correlated manuals, or in the utterances of all those who have led the Church since Joseph Smith. We do not understand that studying the scriptures and words of Joseph Smith quoted above would immediately free us of the need to harmonize the idiosyncratic doctrines to which various presidents have born testimony. Most importantly, we don’t understand the great obligation that this imposes on us to seek the mind and will of God ourselves, not relying on any man or committee of men to speak to God for us.

Our history is a study in the power of words. By changing the use of one word we have profoundly affected our understanding of the gospel at a fundamental level. Now orthodox members see evidence of “prophetic power” in every sentimental story, pithy platitude, quote from a famous poet, and marketing buzzword that comes from the general conference pulpit. They see “prophetic counsel” in every piece of advice or opinion given by “the brethren.” They look at policy changes driven by market research and see revelation. The word “prophet” has become a rhetorical cudgel used to enforce conformity to institutional norms. Who, after all, could possibly be right when they disagree with a “prophet”? Who are we to think we could possibly “know more than the prophets”? Frustratingly, our view of the reliability of church leaders varies with each situation. They are more reliable (“God’s anointed prophets”) when we wish to pressure people to agree with them, and are less reliable (men speaking “in the absence of revelation”) when we want to abandon past doctrine.¹¹⁸ To claim that current Church leaders are wrong about a doctrine will invite accusations of apostasy. Yet when the Church itself changes its doctrinal position members are expected to reject what was, until recently, orthodoxy.¹¹⁹ The only constant in this sea of shifting rhetoric is the requirement not to question current leaders. That’s the real priority. In a sense, “follow the brethren” has become the last unassailable doctrine left in the Church, because it allows all other doctrines to be superseded in favor of new interpretations. M. Russell Ballard demonstrated the effectiveness of a heavy-handed use of this rhetorical device in October 2014 general conference:

“Keep [your] eyes on the leaders of the Church. ... We will not and ... cannot lead [you] astray.

¹¹⁸ “Race and the Church: All Are Alike Unto God”; Official Statement, 29 February 2012.

¹¹⁹ For instance, under Joseph Smith, plural marriage was practiced privately and only by a few, and was never taught to be required for exaltation. Then for decades under Brigham Young and his successors, plural marriage was taught to be absolutely required for exaltation. Then it became an excommunicable offense and the doctrine of exaltation changed once again. There are numerous doctrinal shifts paralleling this.

“And as you teach [people] to focus their eyes on us, teach them to never follow those who think they know more about how to administer the affairs of the Church than ... Heavenly Father and the Lord Jesus Christ do through the priesthood leaders who have the keys to preside.

“I have discovered in my ministry that those who have become lost and confused are typically those who have most often ... forgotten that when the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve speak with a united voice, it is the voice of the Lord for that time. The Lord reminds us, ‘Whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same’”

On whom should we focus our attention (to whom should our eye be single)? Does the fact that a leader was called by "Heavenly Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" mean he has their endorsement for everything he does and says? Does the fact that one is a leader in the Church mean that he was chosen by Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ? If the united voice of our current leaders is the same as God's voice, then wasn't that also true of past leaders? Would God's voice in one time ever contradict his voice at another time?¹²⁰ Are those who fail to conform their opinions and beliefs to the current doctrinal position of the Church really "lost and confused"? Are those who disagree with the approved doctrinal position really claiming to "know more about how to administer the affairs of the Church" than anyone else?

In favoring tradition over scripture, we have forgotten the fundamentals of the gospel taught by Joseph Smith. Rather than being a nation of prophets ourselves, as the people of God ought to be,¹²¹ We are more like the “churchmen” described earlier by Nibley, trusting men in high church positions and “in the safety and permanence of institutions,” while remaining ignorant of the true nature, scope, and importance of revelation¹²²:

The Lord has established all things in order and has given us a perfect system. Men cannot improve upon it. If we would carry out that which the Lord has revealed, as he has revealed it, then all things would be perfect, for the organization is a perfect organization; the theory of it—the plan of it—is without flaw.

The Lord has set up in his church a priesthood organization headed by apostles and prophets. And he has also given other organizations ... to aid and assist in the priesthood.

-Joseph Fielding Smith¹²³

We have learned not to question the validity of what the [current] prophets and apostles teach or to wonder if it makes sense. We have learned that by acting—and acting immediately—on their counsel, our lives are blessed. Some might call our

¹²⁰ I'm not referencing simple policy and procedural changes, but rather the sweeping shifts in doctrine from Joseph's time to today.

¹²¹ Numbers 14:29

¹²² Hugh Nibley, *The World and the Prophets*, p. 175

¹²³ *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Fielding Smith*, “The Church and Kingdom of God”

actions blind obedience. But we have the Lord's personal promise that the prophets will never lead us astray.

-Randall K. Bennet¹²⁴

In all circumstances, follow the teachings of the prophets, the other authorities of the Church, and your local leaders. They will lead you in paths of happiness.

-For The Strength of Youth, Page 43

When we choose to live according to the words of the [current leaders of the Church], we are on the covenant path that leads to eternal perfection...

We heed prophetic word even when it may seem unreasonable, inconvenient, and uncomfortable. According to the world's standards, following the prophet may be unpopular, politically incorrect, or socially unacceptable. But following the prophet is always right.

-Carol F. McConkie¹²⁵

But is this Really Necessary?

For the normative Latter-day Saint, this discussion invites questions: *“Are these great experiences really necessary for men to be prophets? Or are they necessary for anyone else, for that matter? Isn't it enough for our leaders just to be good men and seek inspiration through the whisperings of the spirit? Isn't the fact that they were called to their position evidence that God wants them there, and he will ensure they are on the right path even if guidance doesn't come in the form of impressive revelations? If I have felt the spirit as they teach and testify, isn't that evidence that they are called of God?”*

I understand that the teachings quoted above present ideas that are at odds with 170 years of tradition. That conflict doesn't change the fact that many sources record Joseph saying those things and that the scriptures teach them. Nor does it diminish their truth. Ignore all of my commentary and simply examine the plain meaning of the text. They speak for themselves. The fact that Joseph taught those things doesn't diminish the wonderful contributions made by four generations of presidents and apostles, regardless of whether they knew God or not. They preserved a lot of truth, and we should be grateful. Each person is responsible for how they receive or reject Joseph's teachings, and for reconciling themselves to the truths he taught. It is right for us to have to choose between comforting tradition and uncomfortable truth, whenever that conflict arises. Our salvation should depend on our distinguishing between the two and choosing truth.

Joseph Smith's diary for January 2, 1843 records a conversation after dinner at the home of Mr. William Sollars:

¹²⁴ “Follow the Prophet”, *Ensign*, March 2012

¹²⁵ “Live according to the Words of the Prophets”, General Conference, October 2014

Because faith is wanting the fruits are not. – No man Since the world was ever had faith without having something along with it. The ancients quenched the violence of escaped the edge of the sword women received their Dead. &c by faith the worlds were made. – a man who has none of the gifts- has no faith he deceives himself if he supposes it. faith has been wanting not only among the hethen but but professed Christedom also. – that Tongues. & healigs & prophecy. & prophets & apostles & all these gifts & blessings have been wanting...

Mr Sollars says “may I not Repent & be baptizd & not pay any attention to dreams & visions. &c?”

Joseph said “suppose I am Travelling. & I am hungry I meet a man & tell him I am hungry. he tells me to go yonder, there a house for Entertainment, go knock, & you must conform to all the rules of the house or you cannot satisfy your hunger – knock call for food. & set down & eat. – & I go & knock. & ask for food & set down to the table- but do not eat shall I satisfy my hunger -No! I must eat. the Gifts are the food. -

The graces of the spirit are the Gifts of the spirit.”¹²⁶

Faith inevitably brings with it fruits, including miracles, visions, tongues, prophecy, and the experienced testimony of true prophets and apostles. A man who has none of the gifts has no faith; he deceives himself if he supposes he does. Great architectural projects, swelling membership statistics, meeting attendance, and white shirts are not evidence of faith. It is not enough that your religious leader or great-grandfather had great spiritual experiences. They are present or absent from each person's life according to their own faith. The fact that Joseph knew God is not a sign that the Church 170 years later must still be on the right track. The fact that your neighbor has visions can only benefit you as far as those visions inspire enough faith in you to receive revelation yourself¹²⁷.

Are these magnificent experiences really necessary, asks Mr. Sollars? If the gospel is a feast set for us weary travelers, these experiences are the food. Everything else, the rules, the procedures, the fellowship, everything is simply a means to obtain the food. According to Joseph, if we don't obtain those fruits then we are starving.

The difference between Joseph's mindset and that of contemporary LDS Mormonism comes through in our discourse. Neal A. Maxwell also used the metaphor of a banquet to describe the gospel, but with a significant difference. He reckoned that the “resplendent revelatory banquet” consisted not of our own visions and connection with God, but of our reading and believing Joseph Smith's revelations.¹²⁸ In Elder Maxwell's system, those who go hungry are not those who fail to qualify for their own dreams and visions, but merely those who disbelieved Joseph's. He likened them to dogs, “who seem to prefer chewing on old bones in the outer courtyard”. It is this same shift in thinking that results in the saints constantly using Nephi's command to “feast upon the words of Christ” to encourage scripture study; this in contrast to Nephi's stated intent: to encourage us to receive and feast upon the words of Christ as they came to us personally through the gift of the Holy Ghost, a process that would eventually lead to Christ's presence.¹²⁹ Nephi commanded us to receive our own

¹²⁶ Joseph Smith Diary, January 2 1843

¹²⁷ Moroni 7:30-32

¹²⁸ “How Choice a Seer,” *Ensign*, November 2003

¹²⁹ 2 Nephi 32:1-6

revelation, and we use his words to encourage each other to satisfy ourselves by reading other people's revelations.¹³⁰

While this may be a dominant strain of thought among today's Latter-day Saints, including our leaders, Joseph made it clear that reading and gaining a testimony of others' revelations was not enough. He spoke on this topic on October 9, 1843. His remarks are recorded as follows:

Reading the experience of others, or the revelations given to them, can never give us a comprehensive view of our condition and true relation to God

Knowledge of these things, can only be obtained by experience in these things, through the ordinance of God set forth for that purpose.¹³¹

Could we read and comprehend all that has been written from the days of Adam on the relations of man to God & angels. and the spirits of just men in a future state. we should know very little about it.

Could you gaze in heaven 5 minutes you would know more than you possibly can know by read all that ever was written on the subject. We are one only capable of comprehending that certain things exist. which we may acquire by certain fixed principles.¹³²

How much more effectively could a teacher, a missionary, a stake president, a relief society president, or a church president expound the scriptures once he or she had gazed into heaven five minutes? It is no wonder that these experiences are a firm prerequisite for those who would claim to lead others to salvation. It is also no wonder that we should seek for them ourselves. Hearing a prophet testify of his own experience is essentially the same as reading the record of past prophets' experiences. Neither can ever give us a comprehensive view of our condition and true relation to God. It is for this reason that Joseph constantly emphasized the need for all the saints, including and especially their leaders, to have these experiences.

The things of God are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity--thou must commune with God. How much more dignified and noble are the thoughts of God, than the vain imaginations of the human heart! None but fools will trifle with the souls of men.

How vain and trifling have been our spirits, our conferences, our councils, our meetings, our private as well as public conversations--too low, too mean, too vulgar, too condescending for the dignified characters of the called and chosen of God, according to the purposes of His will, from before the foundation of the world!¹³³

Only a fool will trifle with men's souls by claiming to lead them to salvation when he has not communed with God himself. Joseph says that the conferences, councils, and meetings of the saints under his watch had been low, mean vulgar, and condescending. How much lower must our meetings

¹³⁰ I'm not discouraging scripture study, obviously. Study your scriptures. But also feast upon the words of Christ.

¹³¹ Times and Seasons Record, October 9, 1843

¹³² Smith Diary, October 9, 1843

¹³³ TPJS. pg. 137

be today as we neglect the scriptures, pore over thrice recycled conference talks, and endlessly recite trite stock platitudes and sentimental stories.

Of those who taught that personally knowing God was not necessary for a preacher, Joseph warned:

where are they with all their boasted religion piety & sacredness while at the same time they are Crying out against Prophets Apostles Angels Revelation, Prophesyings, & Visions &C. Why they are Just ripening for the damnation of hell, they will be damned for they reject the more glorious principle of the gospel of Jesus Christ & treat with disdain & trample under foot the main key that unlocks the heavens & puts in our possession the glories of the Celestial world. Yes I say such will be damned with all their professed godliness

¶ Then I would exhort you to go on & continue to call upon God until you make your Calling & election sure for yourselves by obtaining this more sure word of Prophesey & wait patiently for the promise untill you obtain it.¹³⁴

The more sure word of prophecy and the personal knowledge of God is the lifeblood of true religion, the most glorious principle of the gospel of Christ. The saints have spent far too many years, almost two centuries, failing to widely receive “the heavenly gift.”¹³⁵ It is the key that would unlock everything that pertains to life, glory, and salvation. If we want life, glory, and salvation, we must obtain the key. Though we may follow men with the titles “prophet” and “apostle,” we are just as guilty as anyone else of “crying out against prophets and apostles” if we downplay the need for prophets to know God personally. Without “the main key that unlocks the heavens,” we and our leaders are left with nothing but “boasted religion, piety, and sacredness,” and “professed godliness.”

All people are capable of learning and teaching true things, and the spirit will confirm those true things as they teach. The real measure of a person’s fitness to lead others to salvation is their connection with God. God has promised that connection to us, specifically to the Latter-day Saints, in Ether 4:

6 [The revelations of the Brother of Jared] shall not go forth unto the Gentiles until the day that they shall repent of their iniquity, and become clean before the Lord.

7 And in that day that they shall exercise faith in me, saith the Lord, even as the brother of Jared did, that they may become sanctified in me, then will I manifest unto them the things which the brother of Jared saw, even to the unfolding unto them all my revelations, saith Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of the heavens and of the earth, and all things that in them are.

8 And he that will contend against the word of the Lord, let him be accursed; and he that shall deny these things, let him be accursed; for unto them will I show no greater things, saith Jesus Christ; for I am he who speaketh.

The Latter-day Saints are the gentiles to whom the gospel has come in the last days.¹³⁶ If we repent of our iniquity, become clean before the lord, and exercise faith enough to be sanctified, then Jesus Christ will manifest the things that the Brother of Jared saw to us, even to the unfolding of all his revelations. That describes an individual journey of repentance, and an individual blessing. It is not simply a promise of a forthcoming sealed book. It is a promise that we as individuals can see all that

¹³⁴ May 14, 1843, Wilford Woodruff Journal

¹³⁵ 4 Nephi 1:3

¹³⁶ D&C 109:60

the Brother of Jared saw. If a person has not received this blessing, it means that person has not repented of their iniquity, become clean before the Lord, and exercised faith to become sanctified. That is the eternal law by which we obtain these blessings.¹³⁷ If we suppose that we have faith, that we have repented, that we have become clean and sanctified, yet we have not received these blessings, then our definition of those terms is not the same as God's. God keeps his promises.

The promise of these same saving revelations is given many places in scripture:

- to the pure in heart¹³⁸
- to those who love Christ and keep his words¹³⁹
- to those who will not harden their hearts¹⁴⁰
- to those who repent, exercise faith, bring forth good works, and pray without ceasing¹⁴¹
- to those who press forward, feasting upon the words of Christ given to them through the Holy Ghost, and endure to the end¹⁴²
- to those who fear the Lord, and serve him in righteousness and truth until the end¹⁴³
- to those who love God and purify themselves before Him¹⁴⁴
- to those who strip themselves of jealousies and fears¹⁴⁵

The conditions listed for receiving these revelations look exactly like the requirements for salvation, because it is these revelations that bring us salvation. We should not claim to have met these conditions if we have not received the revelations promised.

Some may still believe that though preparing yourself to receive these blessings is important, we cannot control the timetable on which they happen.¹⁴⁶ This is true to a degree. We must be patient and wait on the Lord.¹⁴⁷ However, the constant emphasis of both Joseph Smith and the scriptures is on receiving these blessings here and now. The Lord never indicates that he will delay communing with someone until after death, and the scriptures consistently criticize people for being unprepared for that communion. Regardless of one's opinion on that point, in the near future the necessity of these revelations will take on a new urgency. When Christ returns, we will be tried as by fire as the heavens and the earth come together.¹⁴⁸ We must be able to bear the presence of our fathers in Heaven (Adam, Enoch, Abraham, etc) who return in glory with Christ, and must have sealed ourselves to them.¹⁴⁹ We must have already obtained the knowledge of God.¹⁵⁰ Both of these blessings come in the process of making our calling and election sure. I will repeat a statement from Joseph:

¶ St [Peter] exhorts us to make our Calling & Election shure. This is that sealing power spoken of by Paul in other places (See Eph I. 13.14. ...) That we may be sealed up unto the day of redemption, this principle ought. (in its proper place) to be taught, for

¹³⁷ D&C 130:20-21

¹³⁸ Matthew 5:8; 3 Nephi 12:8

¹³⁹ John 14:23

¹⁴⁰ Alma 12:10

¹⁴¹ Alma 26:22

¹⁴² 2 Nephi 31:20-32:6

¹⁴³ D&C 76:5-10

¹⁴⁴ D&C 76:116

¹⁴⁵ D&C 67:10

¹⁴⁶ They may reference D&C 88: 68 to support this

¹⁴⁷ D&C 101:38

¹⁴⁸ JST Gen. 14:35

¹⁴⁹ JSH 1:37-39, "They that come" are the fathers to whom promises were made. It is they to whom we must be sealed, in addition to our unredeemed dead.

¹⁵⁰ JST Matthew 25:11-12 "... Verily I say unto you, Ye know me not."

God hath not revealed any thing to Joseph, but what he will make known unto the Twelve & even the least Saint may know all things as fast as he is able to--bear them. for the day must come when no man need say to his neighbor know ye the Lord for all shall know him (who Remain) from the least to the greatest. How is this to be done? It is to be done by this sealing power & the other comforter spoken of which will be manifest by Revelation.¹⁵¹

God will not delay his revelations to us if we are prepared. They will come as fast as we are able to bear them. Our ability to bear them depends on our humility, our meekness, our soft-heartedness, our repentance, and our faith in Christ.

*The Bible says "I will send you Elijah before the great & dreadful day of the Lord Come that he shall turn the hearts of the fathers to the Children & the hearts of the Children to their fathers lest I Come & smite the whole earth with a Curse," Now the word turn here should be translated (bind or seal).*¹⁵²

¶ *The spirit of Elijah is that degree of power which holds the sealing power of the Kingdom to seal the hearts of the fathers to the children & of the children their fathers not only on earth but in Heaven both the living & the Dead to each other for they (the dead) cannot be made perfect without us Hebrews 11-40...*

¶ *To obtain this sealing is to make our calling and election sure which we ought to give all diligence to accomplish*¹⁵³

“...Until All Shall Know Me, Who Remain”

After reading the scriptures and teachings about prophets referenced above, this description of those who will inherit Celestial glory should be very familiar. Some of these descriptors are in the future tense, indicating that these people “shall” inherit them. Most of the descriptions, however, are in the present tense. They describe what people who will be exalted *do, and are, right now*. The blue portions are explicitly among the pre-qualifications of prophets described earlier in the essay by the scriptures and Joseph Smith.:

*51 They are they who received the testimony of Jesus, and believed on his name and were baptized after the manner of his burial, being buried in the water in his name, and this according to the commandment which he has given—52 That by keeping the commandments they might be washed and cleansed from all their sins, and receive the Holy Spirit by the laying on of the hands of him who is ordained and sealed unto this power; 53 And who overcome by faith, and are sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, which the Father sheds forth upon all those who are just and true.*¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Joseph Smith, June 27 1839, Willard Richards Pocket Companion

¹⁵² Joseph Smith, Jan. 21 1844, Wilford Woodruff Journal

¹⁵³ Joseph Smith, March 10 1844, Franklin D. Richards “Scriptural Items”

¹⁵⁴ 2 Nephi 31:11-21; 2 Nephi 32:1-6; Moses 6:66; D&C 88:3; D&C 124:124; D&C 132:7,26; D&C 131:5-6

54 They are they who are the church of the Firstborn. 55 They are they into whose hands the Father has given all things—¹⁵⁵

56 They are they who are priests and kings, who have received of his fulness, and of his glory¹⁵⁶;

57 And are priests of the Most High, after the order of Melchizedek, which was after the order of Enoch, which was after the order of the Only Begotten Son.¹⁵⁷

58 Wherefore, as it is written, they are gods, even the sons of God—¹⁵⁸

59 Wherefore, all things are theirs, whether life or death, or things present, or things to come, all are theirs and they are Christ's, and Christ is God's.¹⁵⁹ 60 And they shall overcome all things. 61 Wherefore, let no man glory in man, but rather let him glory in God, who shall subdue all enemies under his feet.

62 These shall dwell in the presence of God and his Christ forever and ever. 63 These are they whom he shall bring with him, when he shall come in the clouds of heaven to reign on the earth over his people. 64 These are they who shall have part in the first resurrection. 65 These are they who shall come forth in the resurrection of the just.

66 These are they who are come unto Mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly place, the holiest of all. 67 These are they who have come to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of Enoch, and of the Firstborn.¹⁶⁰

68 These are they whose names are written in heaven, where God and Christ are the judge of all. 69 These are they who are just men made perfect through Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, who wrought out this perfect atonement through the shedding of his own blood.¹⁶¹

70 These are they whose bodies are celestial, whose glory is that of the sun, even the glory of God, the highest of all, whose glory the sun of the firmament is written of as being typical.

The footnotes contain scriptures inviting believers to obtain these blessings, here, now, in mortality. Each of those experiences (coming to an innumerable company of angels, becoming a priest of the most high God, etc) serves distinct and essential purposes in preparing a person for the afterlife. They each matter. There is a reason why Joseph Smith called the Kirtland educational effort “the School of the Prophets”. The Lectures on Faith, prepared for that school’s instruction and personally edited by Joseph Smith, contain some of the most forceful statements of the necessity of obtaining the presence of God found anywhere in scripture.

¹⁵⁵ D&C 77:11; D&C 78:21; D&C 107:19

¹⁵⁶ Rev. 1:6; D&C 76:20; Alma 13:10; JST Genesis 14; see also Joseph Smith’s sermon, August 27, 1843; One becomes a “priest and king” of the most high when he joins Melchizedek’s priesthood. The explicit purpose of the LDS temple endowment ceremony is to show us the process for entering that holy order.

¹⁵⁷ JST Genesis 14; Alma 13:10-11; D&C 84:42; Moses 6:67

¹⁵⁸ Psalms 82:6; Moses 6:68, Abraham 3:22-4:1

¹⁵⁹ Enos 15-17; Helaman 10:5; D&C 84:37-38

¹⁶⁰ Hebrews 12:22; Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1-2; 1 Nephi 1:8; Hebrews 12:22; Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1-2; 1 Nephi 1:8; This language describes the heavenly city and holy of holies to which prophets ascend, and the “church” or community of redeemed souls with which they now associate.

¹⁶¹ D&C 128:7; Moroni 10:32-33; D&C 84:33; D&C 88:29

These are the glories to which Latter-day Saints aspire. We flatter ourselves that we will obtain them by some magic in the afterlife, ignoring the fact that these verses in D&C 76 are supposed to describe revelations we receive in our *mortal life*. It is perfectly natural that in the widespread absence of these fruits, a religious group will establish other signifiers to identify "righteousness" in themselves and others. These signifiers almost invariably consist of outward appearances and behaviors, because those are easiest to measure. Over time, these signifiers grow in importance, becoming a second set of commandments, an "unwritten order of things," by which we can measure the boundaries of our group. For the Jews it was the "hedge about the law": the strict rules that keep people from breaking commandments, rules that eventually became intrinsic to Jewishness. For Latter-day Saints, these other signifiers tend to be dress codes and appearance, abstinence from coffee, tea, tobacco and illegal drugs¹⁶², 'niceness',¹⁶³ wealth, education, Church callings, outward profession of orthodox belief,¹⁶⁴ and meeting attendance. In such a culture, "repentance" often means returning to conformity with this unwritten order, a concept of repentance foreign to the scriptures. Rather than rely on these essentially meaningless signifiers, you can re-write those verses in D&C 76 as a diagnostic interrogation of your own spiritual state:

- *Have you overcome by faith?*
- *Are you sealed by the Holy Spirit of Promise which the Father sheds forth upon all those who are just and true?*
- *Are you a priest and king, or queen and priestess, who has received of the fulness and glory of the Father?*
- *Are you come unto Mount Zion, unto the city of the living God, to an innumerable company of angles, to the general assembly and church of Enoch, and of the Firstborn?*

These are all blessings you have been invited to receive here and now. If you have not, how can you suppose that you "*shall*" inherit any of the afterlife blessings named? True prophets *are* these things, and their purpose is to invite others to be and do these things here in this life. In a very real, non-metaphorical sense, only prophets and prophetesses will be exalted.¹⁶⁵ Not only must you receive revelation to be saved; the revelation itself IS your salvation. To say you can be redeemed without receiving these great revelations is to say you can be redeemed without being redeemed. The idea contradicts itself. God's redeeming grace is not manifest through the comforting, pacifying, uplifting feelings inherent in all religions. Only those who are not taught the truth in mortality by God's servants are given scriptural permission to delay their ascent.¹⁶⁶ For the rest of us, the saving mercy of Christ comes to us in this life by revelation.

¹⁶² The "word of wisdom," now intrinsic to Latter-day Saint identity, is explicitly not a commandment. It is treated as a commandment, however, and the amount of angst the Saints have about enforcing their version of obedience to it demonstrates its importance as a boundary maintenance tool.

¹⁶³ This has led to an epidemic of passive-aggression. Try googling "passive aggression among the latter-day saints," and spend an afternoon reading the results.

¹⁶⁴ i.e. "bearing testimony"

¹⁶⁵ While this paper makes use of the gendered scriptural language of "prophet" and "priest", it is important to recognize that every revelatory blessing available to men is available to women. There is no saved man without a saved woman, and vice versa. It was a woman who first received the resurrected Christ's personal ministry (Mary Magdalene); there were many women among the Nephites who received the second comforter in 3 Nephi 11. Exploring the practical differences between "priesthood" and "priestesshood," and the necessary part each plays in our redemption, is beyond the scope of this paper. It is the high priesthood which is charged with redeeming mankind (hence the gendered language of this paper about prophets), but a man does not become a high priest without a high priestess at his side. "What is a Prophetess?" is an interesting topic for a different paper.

¹⁶⁶ D&C 137:7-8

Alma 12:34 Therefore, whosoever repenteth, and hardeneth not his heart, he shall have claim on mercy through mine Only Begotten Son, unto a remission of his sins; and these shall enter into my rest.

D&C 84:24...which rest is the fulness of [my] glory

Section 76 ends by reiterating the fact that we need to receive these revelations in this life to prepare us for the life to come:

113 This is the end of the vision which we saw, which we were commanded to write while we were yet in the Spirit.

114 But great and marvelous are the works of the Lord, and the mysteries of his kingdom which he showed unto us, which surpass all understanding in glory, and in might, and in dominion; 115 Which he commanded us we should not write while we were yet in the Spirit, and are not lawful for man to utter;

116 Neither is man capable to make them known, for they are only to be seen and understood by the power of the Holy Spirit, which God bestows on those who love him, and purify themselves before him;

117 To whom he grants this privilege of seeing and knowing for themselves; 118 That through the power and manifestation of the Spirit, while in the flesh, they may be able to bear his presence in the world of glory.

Joseph and Sydney saw many wonderful things which they were commanded to write; but even greater were the "marvelous works" and "mysteries" which they were shown, but were forbidden to write. Those things "surpass all understanding in glory, might, and dominion", and even if they were lawful to utter, man is not "capable to make them known." We must see and know for ourselves, through the power and manifestation of the spirit, here, now, in the flesh, if we hope to bear God's presence after we die. The only barrier is our own refusal to "love" God and "purify [ourselves] before him".

Joseph taught

It is in vain for persons to fancy to themselves that they are heirs with those, or can be heirs with them, who have offered their all in sacrifice, and by this means obtained faith in God and favor with him so as to obtain eternal life, unless they in like manner offer unto him the same sacrifice, and through that offering obtain the knowledge that they are accepted of him.¹⁶⁷

The "knowledge that they are accepted of him" comes when Christ appears and offers his testimony that they are clean and accepted. It only comes after they "have offered their all in sacrifice." This sacrifice, and this revelatory interaction, must happen for a person to be saved. If they have not happened, then it is vain for the person to suppose that they will inherit eternal life. None of us should be content with a lifetime of quiet "whisperings," as though that is all we can appropriately expect. We are commanded to "seek the face of the Lord always."¹⁶⁸ If we spend our lifetime listening to

¹⁶⁷ Lecture on Faith 6:8

¹⁶⁸ D&C 101:38

whisperings, and they don't lead us into God's presence, then it either wasn't God's spirit whispering to us, or we didn't follow those whisperings as diligently and faithfully as we should.¹⁶⁹

To Receive, or to Follow?

Latter-day Saints encounter what can seem like a paradox in the scriptures. On one hand, the scriptures speak of people sent as witnesses and messengers, whose words we are to receive as God's own. On the other hand, we are commanded not to trust in the arm of the flesh, and to look to God directly for answers to our questions. *What is our obligation when God sends a prophet to us? What is our obligation to the members of the quorum of the twelve apostles and first presidency, regardless of whether or not any since Joseph have lived up to the title "prophet?"*

D&C 1 points out the importance of getting this relationship right, and begins to instruct us in how to do that:

12 Prepare ye, prepare ye for that which is to come, for the Lord is nigh; 13 And the anger of the Lord is kindled, and his sword is bathed in heaven, and it shall fall upon the inhabitants of the earth.

14 And the arm of the Lord shall be revealed; and the day cometh that they who will not hear the voice of the Lord, neither the voice of his servants, neither give heed to the words of the prophets and apostles, shall be cut off from among the people;

These verses repeat a warning originally given by Moses, then repeated by Peter, then reiterated by Moroni to Joseph Smith.¹⁷⁰ The commandments here are to "hear" the words of Christ and of his servants, and "give heed to" the words of "the" apostles and prophets.

Since it is Christ speaking, and not a late 20th century Latter-day Saint, we can know that these "apostles" and "prophets" can only include those who meet the revealed criteria laid out above. Here, these titles refer to those who know God personally, have received the high priesthood, and are then sent by God with a defined ministry and message.¹⁷¹ Even when no living person rises to that standard, we must still "give heed to" the words of the prophets and apostles in the scriptures.

"Hearing" these voices must include more than physically listening or reading. If words are given by God, then truly hearing them requires the listener to receive revelation as well.¹⁷² Hearing these voices requires a soft heart, humility, and meekness, because those speaking are rarely those in official leadership positions.¹⁷³

Only when a qualified servant delivers a specific message at God's command could verse 38 be true:

¹⁶⁹ D&C 84:44-48

¹⁷⁰ Deut. 18:15-19, Acts 3:22-23, JSH 1:40; Lectures on Faith 2:55-56

¹⁷¹ This was an explicit part of the charge given to the Quorum of the Twelve at the time the quorum was commissioned. They were told "Your ordination is not full and complete till God has laid His hand upon you. We require as much to qualify us as did those who have gone before us; God is the same." Unless God has changed, the same charge to complete their ordination applies to all 15 top leaders today. Until they do so, their words are not part of the commandment given here. However, we are still required to heed any and all words which come to us by the Holy Ghost, regardless of the mortal voice speaking them (D&C 68:3-5)

¹⁷² D&C 50:17-22 "...And again, he that receiveth the word of truth, doth he receive it by the Spirit of truth or some other way? If it be some other way it is not of God."

¹⁷³ D&C 121:34-40, specifically warning about the effect of Church leadership positions on "almost all men"

38 What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself; and though the heavens and the earth pass away, my word shall not pass away, but shall all be fulfilled, whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same...

This scripture says that whenever God speaks, whether his words come to you directly from him or through the mouth of a mortal or angelic servant, his words will be fulfilled.

It does not say:

- *These "servants" only include the leaders of the Church*
- *The leaders of the Church are definitely among the servants*
- *The brethren are more likely to speak God's words because they have a worldwide stewardship*
- *When the brethren speak it is as though God were speaking, and we are obligated to obey and believe them*
- *Everything spoken by the unanimous voice of the first presidency and quorum of the twelve will be God's words and will be true*
- *Everything the brethren say at General Conference is the word of God*
- *The doctrine taught by the brethren at General Conference will be true or reliable*
- *Everything policy the brethren make will be correct*
- *The brethren cannot lead the church astray*
- *Even if they did give incorrect, uninspired counsel, we would be blessed for obeying them*

To use this scripture to create a system of de-facto infallibility for any man or group of men is wrong. To use it to create an implied equivalence between Church leaders' public messages and God's voice is foolish and vain.¹⁷⁴ When a leader of the church uses it to bolster his own supposed authority, it is self-serving. The commandment¹⁷⁵ to receive Joseph Smith's words as though they were God's came only because Joseph

- repented
- wept for Zion
- received a remission of his sins¹⁷⁶
- had been diligent and prayerful
- had been inspired to move the cause of Zion
- received specific words from God
- received commandments and revelations from God like Moses did

Even this bold commandment only applied when Joseph was on the Lord's errand. As Joseph himself pointed out, "a prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such."¹⁷⁷ The Lord has never

¹⁷⁴ Several speakers wrested the verse to this purpose at the October 2014 General Conference: M. Russell Ballard, "Stay in the Boat and Hold On!"; Carol F. McConkie, "Live according to the Words of the Prophets"; Russel M. Nelson, "Sustaining the Prophets"

¹⁷⁵ D&C 21; D&C 28:2

¹⁷⁶ A reference to his having been fully washed clean and promised exaltation, an event later recorded in D&C 132:50

¹⁷⁷ DHC 5:265.

applied the same endorsement to the teachings of any other Church leader, and its specificity to Joseph Smith means we are not justified in doing so ourselves.¹⁷⁸

Our obligation to prophets is to receive their message. To do so we have to discern that it comes from God, which is not as simple as confirming that they are one of the 15 leaders of the Church. Beyond that “receiving”, we owe them nothing more or less than the sustaining we owe our other brothers and sisters. We must never step beyond receiving their message to look to them as our general source for answers and information. Expecting things from religious leaders which we should obtain from God directly is idolatry. When Nephi returned from his vision to find his brothers arguing, he only reluctantly answered their questions:

2 And it came to pass that I beheld my brethren, and they were disputing one with another concerning the things which my father had spoken unto them.

3 For he truly spake many great things unto them, which were hard to be understood, save a man should inquire of the Lord; and they being hard in their hearts, therefore they did not look unto the Lord as they ought.

4 And now I, Nephi, was grieved because of the hardness of their hearts,...

6 And it came to pass that after I had received strength I spake unto my brethren, desiring to know of them the cause of their disputations.

7 And they said: Behold, we cannot understand the words which our father hath spoken concerning the natural branches of the olive tree, and also concerning the Gentiles.

8 And I said unto them: Have ye inquired of the Lord?

9 And they said unto me: We have not; for the Lord maketh no such thing known unto us.

10 Behold, I said unto them: How is it that ye do not keep the commandments of the Lord? How is it that ye will perish, because of the hardness of your hearts?

11 Do ye not remember the things which the Lord hath said?—If ye will not harden your hearts, and ask me in faith, believing that ye shall receive, with diligence in keeping my commandments, surely these things shall be made known unto you.

Nephi blamed Laman's and Lemuel's hard hearts for their looking to him for knowledge rather than simply asking God directly. It is our hard hearts that cause us to seek a leader to be our intermediary between us and God. It is our hard hearts that cause us to disbelieve that God will guide us personally, and that we need a man to guide us instead. This impulse is a key identifier of telestial beings¹⁷⁹, and there are no shortage of teachers, preachers, and unqualified prophets in this world to fulfill our desire for someone to preach to us. These dealers of religion rely on their official credentials, their power and priesthoods, to establish their authority, rather than their having been sent from the presence of God. They and their devotees scare people into following them by warning of the chaos

¹⁷⁸ For example: “Concerning the living prophet, the Lord commands the people of His Church: ‘Thou shalt give heed unto all his words and commandments...’” Carol F. McConkie, “Live according to the Words of the Prophets”

¹⁷⁹ D&C 76:98-101

and fear that would ensue if every person had to receive their own revelation. Just follow them, they say, and there will be no need to fear. Paradoxically, the same hard heart that causes people to seek and rely on these flatterers also causes them to reject true prophets' ministries.¹⁸⁰

As we saw earlier, Joseph Smith lamented the unwillingness of the saints to receive his ministry. As all other celestial people do, they wanted him to be their conduit to God rather than rising up, connecting with God, and receiving saving light and knowledge from him directly:

President Joseph Smith read the 14th chapter of Ezekiel--said the Lord had declared by the Prophet, that the people should each one stand for himself, and depend on no man or men in that state of corruption of the Jewish church--that righteous persons could only deliver their own souls--applied it to the present state of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints--said if the people departed from the Lord, they must fall--that they were depending on the Prophet, hence were darkened in their minds, in consequence of neglecting the duties devolving upon themselves¹⁸¹

The 14th chapter of Ezekiel warns that if people go to inquire of a prophet, looking to him as their source of light and knowledge, the answers they receive will deceive them and estrange them further from God.¹⁸² The calamity can only be greater for those who similarly idolize "prophets" who don't actually know God. Ezekiel continues, saying that if the Lord sends famine, noisome beasts, the sword, or pestilence through the land, "*Though Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, as I live, saith the Lord God, they shall deliver neither son nor daughter; they shall but deliver their own souls by their righteousness.*"¹⁸³ When a prophet comes, we must not treat him as the Israelites treated Moses, or as the Saints treated Joseph. We must be saved just as Adam and Eve, by our rising up to know God personally.¹⁸⁴ To the degree that we "depend on... man or men" we will be darkened in our minds and estranged from God. The one common thread among all of the sects descended from Joseph Smith seems to be their tendency to reduce Mormonism to a religion of following men. Rather than a personal journey to God's presence, Joseph's religion has devolved into a handful of bickering sects, their members believing they will be saved by diligently following the right leader.

In our Church, as our history shows, the title "prophet" describes our leaders' duty more than their qualifications. Until they complete their ordination under God's own hands and receive their prophetic commission directly from him, none of the scriptural commandments about "servants," "apostles," or "prophets" apply to them. There is a familiar catchy meme: "whom God calls, God qualifies."¹⁸⁵ In fact, the scriptures teach a different principle, something like "Of those whom God calls, very few will be chosen and qualified."¹⁸⁶ Joseph Smith's warning against "depending on the prophet" for revelation goes double for depending on those who only have the title. We should never assume that any church leader's office entitles him to God's blanket endorsement of his teachings, nor should we assume that for any group of men or women. We do them no favors by perpetuating cults of personality, nor do we build saving faith by encouraging or indulging a sense of institutional awe¹⁸⁷.

¹⁸⁰ Alma 35:15

¹⁸¹ May 26, 1842. TPJS, Pg. 237

¹⁸² Ezekiel 14:4-6

¹⁸³ *ibid*, vs. 12-19

¹⁸⁴ Moses 6:68

¹⁸⁵ Thomas S. Monson, "Duty Calls", Ensign, Nov. 1995

¹⁸⁶ D&C 121:34-40

¹⁸⁷ Mormons should study to understand how institutions and institutional leaders inspire a sense of "awe."

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Awe> contains links to many interesting discussions. Tools to inspire religious awe include lighting, music, ritualized social interactions such as hushed silence and standing when a leader enters a meeting, praising and adoring leaders, etc. The LDS Church's media and broadcast arm, Bonneville International,

God never asked us to praise, adore, or revere them, and doing so is more harmful than helpful. We owe them the same obligations we owe all members: to love, uphold, sustain, and respect their stewardship. We should serve diligently, faithfully, and lovingly in our assignments, and allow them the same freedom.

We should rejoice in the many true doctrines that Church leaders teach as these doctrines are confirmed to us by the spirit. We must not deny the power of God, and have a responsibility to discern and receive any words spoken by that power.¹⁸⁸ When they teach doctrines that are not true, we should recognize that we all request the privilege to state our incomplete and imperfect understanding whenever we express ourselves in church meetings. “Sustaining” them does not mean we need to pretend they teach the truth, or refrain from teaching truth ourselves. We are all obligated, including our leaders, to anchor our teachings to the principles taught in the scriptures, diligently seeking to obtain the word before we seek to declare it.¹⁸⁹ If prophets, angels, and the risen Lord rely on the scriptures to teach those to whom they minister, then we should do the same.¹⁹⁰ Every member of the church, from the youngest primary child to the President himself, would do well to remember Boyd K. Packer’s words:

A member, at any given time, may not understand one point of doctrine or another, may have a misconception, or even believe something is true that in fact is false.

There is not much danger in that. That is an inevitable part of learning the gospel. No member of the Church should be embarrassed at the need to repent of a false notion he might have believed. Such ideas are corrected as one grows in light and knowledge.

It is not the belief in a false notion that is the problem, it is the teaching of it to others. In the Church we have the agency to believe whatever we want to believe about whatever we want to believe. But we are not authorized to teach it to others as truth.¹⁹¹

Just because a “false notion” is approved by the Correlation Department doesn’t mean anyone has license to teach it. We are each responsible for what we teach, and we cannot safely waive that responsibility by parroting Correlation. People who set those mainstream teachings which contradict the scriptures can expect to be incorrectly labeled “doubters,” “heretics,” or even “apostates” by those who accept those teachings. No matter how strong the voice of tradition, or how high the price of embracing truth, God still expects us to seek.¹⁹² We should remember that believing what God has revealed, particularly in the face of religious tradition and social and cultural pressure, is an act of faith,

has trademarked the “HeartSell”® technique of “strategic emotional advertising that stimulates response.” This is the music-and-sentiment technique used in all recent LDS media productions, and is explicitly designed to affect viewers behaviors by carefully manufacturing emotional experiences (<http://www.bonneville.com/?nid=32>). Bonneville uses the same techniques in its religious productions as it does in its commercial advertising. Since Latter-day Saints have been conditioned to perceive warm, peaceful emotions as spiritual confirmation, they are ever more likely to mistake HeartSell® brand institutional awe for the the Spirit of God. This sort of emotional manipulation, while effective at building brand loyalty, cannot save anyone.

¹⁸⁸ Moroni 10:7-8, D&C 68:4

¹⁸⁹ D&C 11:21, D&C 42:12

¹⁹⁰ Luke 24:25-27; 3 Nephi 22-25; Mosiah 14; JSH 1:36-4;

“It makes no difference what is written or what anyone has said, if what has been said is in conflict with what the Lord has revealed, we can set it aside. 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. Let us have this matter clear. We have accepted the four standard works as the measuring yardsticks, or balances, by which we measure every man’s doctrine.” Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3:203-204

¹⁹¹ Boyd K. Packer, “From Such Turn Away,” *Ensign* (May 1985): 33.

¹⁹² Matthew 19:29

not doubt. Clinging to traditional beliefs which contradict God's revelations is what the Book of Mormon calls "unbelief," and it causes people to remain in darkness.¹⁹³

As long as we are in this world, we will be bombarded by those who are willing to preach to us. They will offer us the safety and security of an established religion led by an inerrant hierarchy claiming great power and priesthoods. They are well-intentioned, devout, religious, and have much truth to offer. The truths they teach will be mixed with comforting but non-scriptural traditions and philosophies they inherited from their forebears. They will accuse true messengers of being power-hungry predators, leading people astray from systems they believe are divinely established. Among these people we will find our friends, family, and church leaders. Until a person has walked up to every law given in the Temple, thereby obtaining the veil-rending revelation promised there, they remain, more or less, under the power of their adversary. That includes all of us, including the kindest, gentlest, most pious, and eloquent among us. We each bear the responsibility of politely but firmly declaring that we are looking for messengers sent from our Father's presence to teach us. We can expect "almost all men", when they are put into positions of priesthood authority in the Church, to persecute those who make that declaration.¹⁹⁴ They and those who follow them will attempt to coerce others into agreeing with them using all the instruments of institutional power and social pressure, all the while believing they are right to do so.¹⁹⁵

True representatives of God behave very differently. When there is a controversy, they react with love, not fear. Their priority is finding truth, not in being considered "right." If they know they have the truth, and want to convince someone else of it, they will never attempt to use their church office or priesthood to demand compliance.¹⁹⁶ They will attempt to persuade. They will be patient, longsuffering, and loving. They will be gentle and kind with that person, and meekly acknowledge their own weakness. Because they are sharing pure knowledge, they can teach it clearly. They never need to pretend to any knowledge or revelation which they haven't received.¹⁹⁷ Their understanding blossoms from their careful study of the scriptures, allowing them to share what they have received by reasonably expounding scripture.¹⁹⁸ This is the sort of person who can stand confidently in the presence of God as member of His priesthood.¹⁹⁹ They are confident that the truth will cut its own path, and they never feel the need to compel others to believe as they do.²⁰⁰ Because they are less concerned with men's judgments, true messengers may speak frankly and forcefully about the wickedness against which they are called to testify.²⁰¹

¹⁹³ Helaman 15:15

¹⁹⁴ D&C 121:37-38

¹⁹⁵ These tactics include withholding access to rituals they claim "save" a person, disfellowshipping, excommunication, shunning, anger, manipulation, threats, etc. All of these are fear-based responses, rather than love-based. Coercion can manifest itself even through a veneer of "niceness." The constant threat of all religious authoritarians is to deprive those who oppose them of their salvation. Ritual ordinances offered by the Church are symbolic of actual saving interactions with heaven. Those saving interactions are the "ordinances" which we must all seek. Wrongly depriving one of the ritual will not prevent them from obtaining what the ritual symbolizes, any more than performing the ritual guarantees the blessing it symbolizes.

¹⁹⁶ Because no power or authority can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood. – D&C 121:41

¹⁹⁷ D&C 121:41-43

¹⁹⁸ D&C 11:21

¹⁹⁹ D&C 121:45-46

²⁰⁰ Dallin H. Oaks' talk from the October 2014 General Conference does an excellent job of discussing the importance of these principles.

²⁰¹ For instance, Jesus said to the priestly leaders of his day "*Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?*" (Matthew 23:33). He also referred to Herod, the political ruler of Judea, as a "that fox" (Luke 13:32). Both statements would be considered irreverent and highly insulting. The ministry of true prophets is almost universally offensive to others. They trade the hypocritical veneer of niceness and politeness for a deeper, more Christ-like love that manifests itself in blunt, indelicate calls to repentance. As Joseph Smith

In the end, God will pass judgment on those who have falsely claimed to know and represent him.²⁰² We must learn for ourselves to differentiate between true messengers and everyone else, but we should leave condemnation and judgment to God.²⁰³ We should not let ourselves become preoccupied with judging anyone for a perceived lack of revelation, an absence of real authority, or for simply interpreting scripture differently than we do. It is easy and lazy to point out when we believe another person is not on the Lord's errand. It is much harder to discern when a person *is* a true messenger, as they often come without official credentials, reviled and ridiculed by those we trust, indelicately preaching an unpleasant message. It is harder, still, to humble ourselves, repent, arise, and receive and follow our own instructions from God. In the end, Zion can only be built by those who will carefully and thoughtfully discover and discard the false traditions which have wrapped themselves, ivy-like, around the truths of the gospel. Only truth can save us.

JST Genesis 9:22 And this is mine everlasting covenant, that when thy posterity shall embrace the truth, and look upward, then shall Zion look downward, and all the heavens shall shake with gladness, and the earth shall tremble with joy; 23 And the general assembly of the church of the firstborn shall come down out of heaven, and possess the earth, and shall have place until the end come. And this is mine everlasting covenant, which I made with thy father Enoch.

said: "Some of the company thought I was not a very meek Prophet; so I told them: "I am meek and lowly in heart," and will personify Jesus for a moment, to illustrate the principle, and cried out with a loud voice, "Woe unto you, ye doctors; woe unto you, ye lawyers; woe unto you, ye scribes, Pharisees, and hypocrites!" But you cannot find the place where I ever went that I found fault with their food, their drink, their house, their lodgings; no, never; and this is what is meant by the meekness and lowliness of Jesus." (TPJS pg.270)

²⁰² D&C 112:25-26

²⁰³ D&C 64:38-39