

## 20 A Standard of Doctrine

Bruce H. Porter

It is hoped that the ideas and scriptural discussions presented in this work might help explain some of the questions that are often generated between the traditional teachings of the church and the prescribed teachings of the manuals, the scriptures, and the words of Joseph Smith. This work is not trying to present new doctrine or teach mysteries of any sort. There is neither goal nor presumptuous idea in this work that seeks to change the church or any accepted position, doctrine, or tradition espoused or taught by its general leadership. However, traditions are strong and sometimes become more important than true doctrine and scripture.

Every business and organization must determine which problems or traditions can be changed without much effort or cost, and which issues cannot be improved because of a cost so high it might prohibit the modification. These costs and repercussions might require better machinery or the rewriting of the many manuals of instruction and publications. This process may require correcting the public statements of executives, which correction might cause a disruption within an organization, creating a lack of faith or trust in leadership that would be better left alone. In the same way, many traditions and policies in the church are perpetrated gradually over time, so that eventually the ‘traditions of men’ assume the force of doctrine. As these traditions become accepted as doctrines, they become more difficult to change with each passing generation. This is because the cost of change may outweigh the benefits of making the correction. These doctrinal traditions are not perpetuated intentionally, but they nevertheless become accepted by all who are exposed to the traditions or interpretations over time.

The scriptures are the best commentary on the scriptures and all members of the church should rely on the doctrines and teachings found in the “standard works” or canonized scriptures. The words of the prophets and apostles at general conference are those issues and ideas that members of the Church need to know and understand to survive the spiritual and temporal calamities of the last days. The talks of leaders help individual members recognize the need for change in their character and lifestyles. Even though policies and programs may change to better administer the gospel to the general membership of the church, true and eternal principles and doctrines do not change. Doctrines that need to be changed or scripture that needs to be added will be accomplished by revelation. This change can only come only through the *prophet and president* of the church. It is then presented as Declaration with the sustaining vote of the general membership of the church. The two examples of doctrinal changes are the Declarations on “The Plurality of Wives” and “The Priesthood to All Worthy Males” found in the Doctrine and Covenants. This is the standard: *revelation* is scripture. A *declaration* is a change of revelatory position or doctrine within scripture. A *proclamation* establishes or emphasizes the position of the church on a given issue or subject based on existing revelation or scripture.

The scriptures are often referred to as the “Standard Works.” However, for many reasons they have not remained the standards of doctrine and truth among the general membership of the church. Because of our lay ministry, what is taught is generally filtered by the teachers’ opinions and understandings, which is a product of their education, upbringing, and traditions. This is one reason

prepared manuals of instruction are needed. These manuals have been written under the direction of the leaders of the church to help teachers understand basic principles and doctrines using the scriptures. Since the leaders have stressed that teachers ‘stick with the manual’ rather than open the scriptures, traditions have sometimes morphed into doctrines, creating questions in the minds of many members.

Sadly, the scriptures as a standard have taken second place to the Ensign, the Church News and other sources of information. Many members have found it more convenient and entertaining to quote books, talks, and articles using church authorities as sources rather than quoting straight from the scriptures. In a classroom setting, when scriptures are quoted or read that teach something different than tradition, the first cry is, “but Elder ‘so-and-so’ said—”. Many teachers and speakers scramble to find quotes from publications, Internet blogs, or websites from self-appointed saviors of gospel doctrine teachers, which perpetuates the acceptance of traditions rather than rely on the prepared manuals and the scriptures. Many years ago, *Epecially for Mormons* was the source book for almost every talk in church rather than the scriptures. Sacrament talks today are drawn more from the words of church leaders than they are from scripture. Not that this is wrong, but the scriptures are the “standard” of truth and should be the primary source when it comes to doctrinal learning or teaching.

Some members feel that the Ensign should take the place of the scriptures, and that the scriptures should only be used as a secondary source rather than as the primary word of God. The words of modern priesthood leaders are important for the day and age in which we live, and their counsel is needed and invaluable as we plod through the struggles of daily life seeking to become free from the sins of our times. Nevertheless, the scriptures set the doctrinal standards and *should be* the primary source of light, truth, and doctrine, rather than opinion, tradition and personal interpretation. God is the same yesterday, today and forever and His word, found in scripture, is for every dispensation, as the nature and sins of mankind have never changed.

The scriptures have been neglected because it takes effort and time to study them well enough to learn the doctrines contained in them, much less where to find them. Everyone has their favorite scripture verse and quote to pass along in Gospel Doctrine class, but to know the scriptures requires constant effort and study. There are only a few times that the word “read” is used in reference to what should be done with the scriptures. More often, words like: *hold tightly, seek to obtain my word, grasp firmly, feast upon, ponder in your hearts, seek diligently and study*, is found. All these words and phrases imply more than simple rote reading. Many members check the obedience box by reaching the goal of an allotment of time, or reading a set number of verses or chapters in order to fulfill the perceived requirement of scripture reading. The scriptures should be *read consecutively* by chapters, verses, or time. However, one should *study the scriptures topically*—searching, pondering and feasting in addition to the reading that one might accomplish.

The importance of the scriptures or ‘Standard Works’ are easily seen in a few quotes from church leaders as they explain that, not just priesthood leaders, but even the prophets themselves are held accountable to the doctrines and teachings found in scripture. This means that scriptural accountability rests upon all, from prophet to primary teacher.

Joseph Fielding Smith

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 teaching 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*, Vol.3, p.203)

You cannot accept the books written by the authorities of the church as standards in doctrine, only in so far as they accord with the revealed word in the standard works. (Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, Vol.3, p. 203)

The Lord has given us the four Standards which lie at the foundation of our faith. Each member of the church should be so well versed that he or she, would be able to discern whether or not any doctrine taught conforms to the revealed word of the Lord. . .The fact remains, however, that too many of the members have not taken advantage of their blessings and obligations, and therefore they are unable to distinguish between truth and error. *The "lay" members of the Church are under obligation to accept the teachings of the authorities, unless they can discover in them some conflict with the revelations and commandments the Lord has given. There are times when the leading brethren have expressed their own opinions on various subjects. This they have a perfect right to do.* They have divided on political questions; some belong to one political party and others to another. This they have a perfect right to do. (Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, Vol.2, p.113)

Harold B. Lee

We have the standard church works. Why do we call them standard? *If there is any teacher who teaches a doctrine that can't be substantiated from the standard church works—and I make one qualification, and that is unless that one be the president of the church, who alone has the right to declare new doctrine—then you may know by that same token that such a teacher is but expressing his own opinion. If, on the other hand, you have someone teaching a doctrine that cannot be substantiated by the scriptures, and more than that, if it contradicts what is in the standard Church works, you may know that that person is teaching false doctrine, no matter what his position in this church may be.* The president of the church alone may declare the mind and will of God to His people. No officer nor any other church in the world has this high and lofty prerogative. When the president proclaims any such new doctrine, he will declare it to be a revelation from the Lord. (Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye In Holy Places*, p.109-110)

It is not to be thought that every word spoken by the General Authorities is inspired, or that they are moved upon by the Holy Ghost in everything they write. *I don't care what his position is. If he writes something or speaks something that goes beyond anything that you can find in the standard church works, unless that one be the prophet, seer, and revelator—please note that one exception—you may immediately say, "Well, that is his own idea." And if he says something that contradicts what is found in the standard church works, you may know by that same token that it is false, regardless of the position of the man who says it.* (Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye In Holy Places*, p.162-163)

Ezra Taft Benson

We know that Satan has great power to deceive, and because of this, we must be aware. The safeguard against his sophistry and deception has been specified by revelation. We are to give heed to the words of eternal life. In other words, we must understand and live by the revelations the Lord has granted to His prophets. These are contained in the four standard works and the written and public declarations of our current prophet. (*Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson*, p.404-405)

Bruce R. McConkie

*The books, writings, explanations, expositions, views, and theories of even the wisest and greatest men, either in or out of the church, do not rank with the standard works. Even the writings, teachings, and opinions of the prophets of God are acceptable only to the extent they are in harmony with what God has revealed and what is recorded in the standard works. (Bruce R. McConkie, Mormon Doctrine, p.764)*

As these quotes make clear, the standard works are the standards of doctrine and truth, and modern day prophets and apostles are held accountable to these standards of truth.

As mentioned earlier, if scriptures are to be added to, or doctrines changed, it can only be done by the President of the Church, not by any other general authority or church leader. The scriptures are the standards for prophet and apostle alike, and only the Prophet and President of the Church has the authority to make any changes by revelation.

A common motif in the heavenly visitations of God and angels is that a manifestation of the divine is almost always accompanied by scripture being quoted as the sources of the central message. Christ quoted and explained scripture in his teaching during his life and often answered questions using scripture. The Sermon on the Mount is based on the fulfilling the law given to Moses. In the Book of Mormon, Christ quoted Malachi and Isaiah and commanded that their words be added to the record. When the Father and Son appeared to Joseph Smith in the First Vision, Christ quoted scripture. Joseph's account of Moroni's visit reveals that the angel quoted the same passage of scripture multiple times and throughout the night. If the scriptures are important enough for God and angels to use, then they should be important enough for all to study and talk about in every meeting.

Everyone has a favorite General Authority to quote and rely on for insights and teaching. However, the scriptures are the standard for the prophets and should be for all priesthood leaders. Without a standard there is no basis for doctrine and truth. God is the same yesterday, today and forever. The priesthood leaders teach, when they speak in local and general settings, how to become better saints. They instruct the members using concepts and principles that will help listeners develop a better character as they seek for that relationship with God. Leaders must adhere to their call of perfecting the saints, the work of the ministry, and edifying the body of Christ. In order to accomplish this great work of teaching and ministering, the scriptures must always be the standard of truth and doctrine.

Every spiritual revival that has occurred in the history of the world has revolved around the scriptures—every one. From Adam teaching his children the words of God to Enoch quoting from the Book of Adam to establish his city; from Moses coming down from the Mount with the Law

to Josiah finding the record of the Law. The early Christian church relied on the Law and the Prophets of Judaism along with the Gospels and the letters of the apostles to help set the religious and moral standard. The reformation that began with Luther and his interpretation of scripture spawned the Protestant faiths. The publication of the Bible in German and then English fostered a religious awakening that led to the Puritans and Pilgrims moving to a new land for religious freedom and the private interpretation of scripture. The Book of Mormon and other modern scripture from a living prophet was pivotal in the rise of the Latter-day Saint faith. Every spiritual revival was founded in, on, and around sacred texts. It may be that the next spiritual revival, when it comes, will of necessity revolve around scriptures once again.

## **Growing Pains**

History teaches that every organization, nation, government, or religion will have some growing pains, even if the leadership was chosen by God and the prophet leaders are inspired. Moses continued to learn after he led the Children of Israel out of Egypt. It is evident that those who founded this nation were inspired by God to do so, and they still had to go through the growing pains of a new nation. The same is evident as the church moved from Palmyra to Kirtland, from Kirtland to Far West, then from Far West to Nauvoo, and shortly thereafter from Nauvoo to Salt Lake City. Even today, as the membership snowballs, the church still has growing pains along the way, as the gospel is *always new* to every generation. That which keeps the church or any other organization together and solid through these growing pains is an *unalterable standard*. Where would the United States be today without its Constitution to set the rules of freedom and rights?

The growing pains of any organization are sometimes met with inside opposition, especially when a supposed doctrine is only tradition or policy. Likewise, there is opposition when some do not know the doctrine or the standard that sets the doctrine apart from policy, opinion, or tradition.

There are members of the church that are trying to convince others that some specific and current doctrines are *not correct or 'fair'*. These individuals believe that these doctrines are just policies, and that doctrine can and should change with the times (the linear view of time). Policy may need to change often, to reflect the needs of the church, but doctrine cannot change because doctrine is established in scripture. Understanding the difference between doctrine and policy requires one to accept the standard as an irrevocable standard. Thus, many “do err, not knowing the scriptures” (Matthew 22:29). A church without a standard of truth in God’s word is not a church. Without a standard, every member would be “tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine” based on the whim or wish of the arm of flesh.

When the rules and doctrines of an organization are open to change by petition, vigil, vote, or pressure, it is not a religion—it is a social club. If doctrines can change with every social movement because the standards of salvation and truth are fluid, then that religion has no power of salvation, authority, or eternal truths upon which one might build an enduring faith. To be considered a religion, the organization’s articles of faith and doctrines of truth cannot change, and therefore must be founded on a written standard that will not change. The individual that does not like the rules of an organization that is founded on unchangeable doctrine and scripture will discover there are many other options. There exists clubs and organizations and even other

churches where the petition and vote of a committee have the power to change the rules without the burden of a scriptural standard.

Thus, when any activist declares that the church needs 'changing', what they are really saying is that the organization is not a religion, that the doctrines are not founded on scripture, and that the church is not directed by Christ. They are subtly insinuating that the church is just a social club that can be changed by petition or vigil. Those who seek to change doctrine are also asserting that the priesthood leaders are no longer inspired and that God needs to change His mind to conform to personal opinions and desires of special interest groups. In short, they do not believe the church is true.

9 For do we not read that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and in him there is no variableness neither shadow of changing?

10 And now, if ye have imagined up unto yourselves a god who doth vary, and in whom there is shadow of changing, then have ye imagined up unto yourselves a god who is not a God of miracles. (Mormon 9:9-10)

## **Religion and Scripture**

The word **Religion** is defined as “*A set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature and purpose of the universe. A religion explains why things are, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs.*” A religion or system of beliefs will answer questions about the purpose of the universe, about the creation, the Creator, and will establish rituals and a written moral code.

The word **Scripture** is defined as: “*A definitive collection of sacred books regarded as given by the inspiration of God, with the purpose to perpetuate His revealed will.*” Scripture is the way God makes known His will to man. This He does by raising up men from time to time to commit to writing an infallible record [His revelations]. He then places His seal of authority on these divine collections as given by inspiration.

A religion must be founded upon the revealed word of God that is unchangeable or it cannot be considered a religion. Everyone within a religion or denomination should understand that God-given rules cannot and should not be changed but by divine revelation. The scriptures are the standards—not the cultural beliefs or practices of the time or generation in which one lives, nor the standards of political correctness currently in vogue. Someone who seeks to force a change in church doctrine does not know the difference between doctrine and policy, or scripture and opinion.

There is a standard to which the church and the doctrine *MUST* adhere. This standard will not change and cannot change without the heavens opening. The scriptures are the standard, because God is the “same today, yesterday and forever.”