

Chapter 4: The Prophet Joseph Smith, God's Instrument in Restoring the Truth

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1. Joseph followed his promptings to pray (GAS)

It was a very natural thing that Joseph Smith should seek the Lord. He came of a ... people who believed in our Heavenly Father, in the divine mission of the Savior, in the efficacy of prayer, and that God would hear and answer his people if they went before him with a proper spirit. It was easy for this young man to believe, because he had been born and reared in a believing household; and when he went out into the woods ... he believed that his prayer would be answered.

2. Joseph's First Vision (GAS)

Faith prompted Joseph to seek God in prayer and ask which church he should identify himself with. What was the response? Did the Lord say, "My boy, they are all good, they are all striving to keep my commandments, the men who are leaders of all these churches are approved of me, any church will do, they will all lead you back into the presence of our Heavenly Father?"

The boy might have expected such an answer from the conditions that existed. But he wanted to know what to do, and he had full faith that the Lord would tell him. So when he prayed, he asked which of the churches he should join, and I presume he was astonished when [he was told], "Join none of them; all their creeds were an abomination," they teach for doctrine the commandments of men; they draw near to me with their lips but their hearts are far from me; they have a form of godliness, but deny the power thereof." Think of a boy [14] years of age arising from his knees in the woods near his home and announcing to the world such a message as that! Can you imagine that a youth would have dared to do such a thing as that? But with the witness that had been given unto him by his Heavenly Father, with that commandment from the Lord himself, dared he do anything else than make the announcement that the Lord had spoken to him?

3. What are creeds and their purposes?

4. Apostles' Creed (Schaff, 1:21–29; Gonzalez 1:62–66)

Irenaeus (AD 132–202) and other bishops argued against heresies. They defined the core of the New Testament, developed the Apostles' Creed, and taught that bishops were the successors of the apostles. "The basic text was put together ... around the year 150 ... [to] distinguish true believers" from heretics who denied many parts of the creed. Before baptism, candidates were asked if they accepted this creed. The Old Roman Form (AD 340, 390) is:

I believe in GOD THE FATHER Almighty.

And in JESUS CHRIST, his only Son, our Lord; Who was born by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary; Was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was buried; The third day he rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven; and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

And in the HOLY GHOST; The Holy Church; The forgiveness of sins; The resurrection of the body (flesh).

5. Christianity and Philosophy (MFS)

"Athens became the chief intellectual center of Greece. ... Plato [c. 380 BC] and Aristotle [335 BC] founded schools ... that attracted philosophers and scientists from all over Greece." In Athens and Alexandria, Greek philosophy included religion and what we now call science. Greeks frequently criticized Jewish and Christian beliefs that were not academically correct according to Plato and other philosophers. Celsus (c. AD 185), a Greek philosopher and

critic of the Christian church, made fun of the God of the Prophets found in the Old Testament. "The Christians say that God has hands, a mouth, and a voice; they are always proclaiming that 'God said this' or 'God spoke.' ... I can only comment that such a God is no god at all, for God has neither hands, mouth, nor voice, nor any characteristics of which we know. ... They have not read Plato. ... [The] God of the philosophers is himself the underivable, the unnameable; he cannot be reached by reason. ... He cannot be comprehended in terms of attributes or human experience."

Mingling philosophy and scriptures, Origen (AD 185–232) "gave Christianity full scientific standing in that age" by interpreting the Bible allegorically instead of literally. Origen said, "the Scriptures are of little use to those who understand them as they are written." Only simple and ignorant Christians accepted the literal interpretation of the Bible.

The relationship between Christianity and Greek philosophy went through five stages:

- cautious acquaintance (Paul, the apostle),
- casual friends (Justin Martyr [AD 100–165]),
- good friends (Origen [AD 185–232]),
- courtship (first council of Nicea [AD 325]), and
- marriage (Augustine, fourth council [AD 451]).

6. Ecumenical and other Councils (Schaff, 1:44)

- First Council of Nicæa, AD 325; Constantine; Nicene Creed
- First Council of Constantinople, AD 381.
- Council of Ephesus, AD 431 [confess Mary or else]
- Council of Chalcedon, AD 451.
- Second Council of Constantinople, AD 553
- Third Council of Constantinople, AD 680
- Second Council of Nicæa, AD 787; images venerated
- (1215) Transubstantiation
- (1545–63) condemned many protestant doctrines and teachers; approved Latin Bible, tradition, seven sacraments, Apocrypha; discouraged Bible study for members.
- (1870) Pope infallible
- (1962–65) common languages used in rites and Masses

"The first four Councils are by far the most important, as they settled the orthodox faith on the Trinity and the Incarnation."

Roman Catholics accept 21 councils (AD 325–1965). Most Protestants accept only the first seven councils. Armenian, Syrian, Coptic, and Abyssinian Christianity all rejected the 'great church' at 4th council (AD 451). Greek Orthodoxy formally rejected the authority of the Western church in AD 1054. (SER, 35, 116)

7. Westminster Confession, AD 1647 (Schaff, 2:602+)

"In 1647, the [Westminster] Assembly completed two catechisms, a Larger [12,000+ words], for pulpit exposition, and a Shorter, for the training of children primarily. Both were approved by the English Parliament and the Scottish General Assembly in 1648. The *Westminster Confession* and catechisms ... have always ranked among the most notable expositions of Calvinism." (Walker, 414)

In 1689, "William and Mary became rulers of Scotland. In 1690, Parliament restored all Presbyterian ministers ejected since 1661, ratified the Westminster Confession, and declared Presbyterianism the form recognized by the government." (Walker, 419)

In America, the "early Congregationalists of New England did not differ theologically from their Puritan brethren in Great Britain—they welcomed the appearance of the Westminster Confession, adopted it in substance. ... By 1631, in Massachusetts and

speedily in the other Puritan colonies, Congregationalism was established by law.” (Walker, 433)

Scripture: Books of the Bible accepted as scripture are listed. The Apocrypha (accepted by Catholics) is not scripture. The scriptures are to be translated into common languages from Hebrew and Greek, not Latin (accepted by Catholics). (Schaff, 2:602, 605)

Trinity: “There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, ... most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, ... forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal most just and terrible in his judgments; hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty. ... In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost.” (Schaff, 2:606–7)

Sacraments: “There be only two sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the gospel, that is to say, Baptism and the Supper of the Lord: neither of which may be dispensed by any but a minister of the Word lawfully ordained.” Transubstantiation “is repugnant, not to Scripture alone, but even to common-sense.” (Schaff, 661)

Heaven, Hell, but no Purgatory: “Besides these two places [heaven and hell] for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none.” (Schaff, 2:671)

Head of Church: Christ is the head, not the pope [the antichrist]

Civil magistrate: It is his duty “to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed. ... He hath power to call [councils], to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God.” (Schaff, 2:653)

“A far as a civil government is identified with a particular Church, an offense against that Church becomes an offense against the State, and subject to its penal code. (Schaff, 1:795–6)

8. First Vision and the creeds (GAS)

How did the First Vision contradict the creeds?

His faith in God led him away from the belief, common in his day, that the Bible contained all the revelation possible for men to receive, and that the heavens were sealed over his head. He prayed to the Lord, and his prayer was answered. He beheld the Father and the Son descending to earth surrounded with glorious light. He received an indisputable knowledge that they had tabernacles like men, and that they were material personages; they spoke to him and he heard their voices.

The result [of Joseph’s prayer] was that wonderful manifestation, unlike any other that we have ever heard of in the history of the world. We have heard of instances where our Heavenly Father has manifested himself; we have read of instances where the Redeemer of mankind has manifested himself; but we have never read of any instance where the Father and the Son before have appeared to any living being and have spoken to that individual.

In the year 1830, when this Church was organized, there was not upon the earth a church organization that would announce that they believed that God would reveal himself to the children of men. The teachings of the churches were all contrary to that, and our Father saw the futility of trying to save his sons and daughters

until they could be inspired to come to him with the belief that he would hear and answer their prayers. When the boy prophet, in the woods of Palmyra, saw the Father and the Son, and realized that they were indeed personages, that they could hear and reply to what he said, it began a new era in this world, and laid a foundation for the faith of the children of men. They could now pray to our Father in heaven and realize that he could hear and answer their prayers, that there was a connection between the heavens and the earth.

9. Joseph restored the gospel and the church (GAS)

Joseph Smith was only a boy when the hands of Peter, James and John were laid upon his head and he was ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood,—he and Oliver Cowdery. A little later Joseph Smith was directed to organize a Church. He was only a young man, but he organized it under the direction of the Redeemer of mankind. And it is patterned after the Church which was organized by the Savior when he was upon the earth. I have no doubt there were many who looked upon this young man as an upstart, and thought it was ridiculous that one who had not been educated to become a leader should presume to lead. But he was like the other servants of our Heavenly Father who have lived upon the earth, who have been called by the Lord to perform a special labor, and the lack of knowledge pertaining to the things of this world did not preclude the possibility of the Lord’s giving unto him information that made him equal and even superior in many respects to those who had possessed great earthly opportunities that were denied him.

Abused and misrepresented though he was, despised by those who should have been his friends, opposed by the learned and scholarly men of the time, he succeeded in restoring the Gospel of life and salvation and establishing the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

While the powers of evil were ever active for his destruction, he was preserved by the Lord until his work was finished and all the keys and ordinances necessary for the salvation of the human family had again been delivered to men.

Through him was revealed temple building, the eternity of the marriage covenant, and salvation for the dead, bringing unspeakable joy to thousands of our Father’s children.

There is no other way that happiness may be enjoyed by the children of men but by lives of righteousness, and people cannot live righteous lives and be out of harmony with truth. There was much truth in the world but it was so mixed with error that the Lord himself told the Prophet Joseph Smith that the men who were the teachers and instructors in the churches taught for doctrine the commandments of men, and warned the boy that he was not to be identified with them. He then restored the gospel, the power of God unto salvation, unto all those who will believe and obey it.

10. Joseph on creeds

The [Muslim] condemns the heathen, the Jew, and the Christian ... that reject his Koran, as infidels, and consigns the whole of them to perdition. The Jew believes that the whole world that rejects his faith and are not circumcised, are Gentile dogs, all will be damned. The heathen is equally as tenacious about his principles, and the Christian consigns all to perdition who cannot bow to his creed. ... But while one portion of the human race is judging and condemning the other without mercy, the Great Parent of the universe looks upon the whole of the human family with a fatherly care and paternal regard; He views them as His offspring, and ... causes “His sun to rise on the evil and on the

good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.” ... He is a wise Lawgiver, and will judge all men, not according to the narrow, contracted notions of men, but, “according to the deeds done in the body whether they be good or evil.” (HC 4: ch 35)

I told [Law] I had no creed to circumscribe my mind; therefore the people did not like me. ... The most prominent difference in sentiment between the Latter-day Saints and sectarians was, that the latter were all circumscribed by some peculiar creed, which deprived its members the privilege of believing anything not contained therein, whereas the Latter-day Saints have no creed, but are ready to believe all true principles that exist, as they are made manifest from time to time. (HC 5:214–215)

Elder Pelatiah Brown, one of the wisest old heads we have among us ... has been preaching concerning the beast which was fall of eyes before and behind; and for this he was hauled up for trial before the High Council. I did not like the old man being called up for erring in doctrine. It looks too much like the Methodist, and not like the Latter-day Saints. Methodists have creeds which a man must believe or be asked out of their church. I want the liberty of thinking and believing as I please. It feels so good not to be trammelled. It does not prove that a man is not a good man because he errs in doctrine. The High Council undertook to censure and correct Elder Brown, because of his teachings in relation to the beasts. Whether they actually corrected him or not, I am a little doubtful, but don't care. (HC 5:340)

I cannot believe in any of the creeds of the different denominations, because they all have some things in them I cannot subscribe to, though all of them have some truth. I want to come up into the presence of God, and learn all things; but the creeds set up stakes, and say, “Hitherto shalt thou come, and no further;” which I cannot subscribe to. (HC 6:57)

11. David O. McKay

Sterling McMurrin was an LDS intellectual who left the BYU faculty to join the U of U faculty. He openly doubted the Church. When he was threatened with excommunication by his bishop, President McKay said: “They can't do this to you. ... If they put you on trial for excommunication, I will be there as the first witness in your behalf.” (Denver Snuffer, *18 Questions*, 324–325)

12. What is heresy?

To Jews: “The early Christians did not believe that they were following a new religion. They were Jews ... [who] were convinced that the Messiah had come.” Jewish religious leaders considered Christianity to be a heretical sect of Judaism that was “tempting good Jews to become heretics.” Christians were considered heretics because they accepted new scripture, believed in new revelations, and rejected Jewish creeds, traditions, and authority. Jewish religious leaders attempted to use *force* to silence dissent and heretics. Christians were put in prison, killed, or run out of town.

To Early Christians: False teachers misrepresented the apostles and their writings. For early catholic bishops and their successors, a heretic was one who (a) rejected any part of the Old and New Testament as defined by them, (b) accepted other writings as scripture, (c) believed in new revelation, or (d) rejected their creeds, traditions, and authority. Like Christ and the apostles, bishops and “heretics” used *persuasion* to keep and gain followers. No Christian group could use legal *force* to silence dissent or heretics during the first 300 years.

To established Catholic religion: After becoming the established religion of the Roman Empire, the Catholic Church was entitled to *government money* and to use *government force* to silence dissent and heretics. The council of Nicea was the first of several universal Catholic councils called by the emperor to settle Christian controversies. The resulting creeds helped identify heresies and government force (e.g., police, courts, prison, war) was used to silence dissent and heretics. Not long before it had been a crime to be a Christian. Now it was a crime to be a heretic. It was certainly easier to use force to silence dissent than to use persuasion to keep or gain followers. Now Christians were using the sword against other Christians with different beliefs. “Eventually, far more Christians ... were slaughtered by the sword of the church than had ever been slain by the Romans.” Where necessary, armies were used to fight rebellious groups deemed heretical.

To established Protestant religions: In England, King Henry VIII rebelled against the Pope for not approving his divorce of Catherine. In 1534, Parliament enacted laws rejecting the authority of the Pope and making the king the “supreme head of the Church of England.” The Church of England became the established or state religion of England. It retained Catholic beliefs and practices but rejected the Pope as the head of the church. It continued to restrict the religious freedoms of Protestants to meet, write, and teach their heresies.

During the reformation, Catholic leaders used government force to silence heretics and their writings. In some cases, force was used to compel conversion to Christianity. The Church of England continued this persecution. Protestants began to travel to North America in search of religious freedom. When they had the freedom to practice their religions as they wished, they also established their religion in their states and used the power of state government to fund their church and to silence dissent.

U.S. Constitution: When the Constitution was ratified in 1788, six of the thirteen states still had state religions. The first amendment in the Bill of Rights says “*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; ...*” The part about religion prevented the federal government from establishing a national religion (i.e., funding or enforcing) and from making laws that restricted (a) the religious liberties of citizens or (b) the rights of states to have a state religion. However, now this amendment is interpreted not as a restriction on government control of religion, but as a restriction on religions to prevent religious influence in politics as well as government funded organizations (e.g., schools) or facilities.

To modern Muslim leaders: Religious and political Muslim leaders use accusations of blasphemy and defamation to silence dissent, dissenters, and non-politically correct ideas or religions. Like Nephite political leaders seeking power, they “stir up [followers] to anger” and encourage the use of force to kill or intimidate opposition. Instead of defending freedom of speech and press, many countries are restricting criticism of the politically correct Islam using labels like hate speech, human rights, religious tolerance, Islamophobia, negative stereotyping, religious insults, defamation, and political correctness. Such restrictions represent a revival of blasphemy and heresy laws under new names.

“In 1989 ... Iran's Supreme Leader, declared it the duty of every Muslim to kill British-based writer Salman Rushdie on the grounds that his novel ... was blasphemous. Rushdie has survived by living his life in hiding. Others connected with the

book were not so fortunate: its Japanese translator was assassinated, its Italian translator was stabbed, its Norwegian publisher was shot, and 35 guests at a hotel hosting its Turkish publisher were burned to death in an arson attack. ... Many in our media claim to be self-censoring out of sensitivity to religious feelings, but that claim is repeatedly undercut by their willingness to mock and criticize religions other than Islam. ... It's because they're scared." (*Imprimis*, 2/2012)

"In 2006, a [Muslim] group ... emailed over 30 prominent reformers in the West, threatening to kill them unless they repented. ... The targets were pronounced 'guilty of apostasy, unbelief, and denial of the Islamic established facts' and given three days to 'announce their repentance.' The message included their addresses and the names of their spouses and children." (*Imprimis*, 2/2012)

"Violence in response to purported religious insults is not simply spontaneous. It is also stoked and channeled by governments for political purposes. And the objects and victims of accusations of religious insults are not usually Westerners, but minorities and dissidents in the Muslim world. ... Accusations of blasphemy or insulting Islam are used systematically in much of that world to send individuals to jail or to bring about intimidation through threats, beatings, and killings. ... Currently, millions of Baha'is and Ahmadis—followers of religions or interpretations that arose after Islam—are condemned en masse as insulters of Islam, and are subject to discriminatory laws and attacks by mobs, vigilantes, and terrorists. The Baha'i leadership in Iran is in prison, and there is no penalty in Iran for killing a Baha'i. In Somalia ... an Islamist group ... is systematically hunting down and killing Christians. ... Throughout the Muslim world, Sunni, Shia, and Sufi Muslims may be persecuted for differing from the version of Islam." (*Imprimis*, 2/2012)

"The Obama administration stands 'united' with the OIC [Organization of Islamic Cooperation] on speech issues. The OIC's charter commits it 'to combat defamation of Islam.'" (*Imprimis*, 2/2012)

13. Joseph was willing to give his life (GAS)

This youth was so sure of the revelation that he had received, and was so anxious that his Father's children, all of them, should know of the truth, that from the time he received the plates of the Book of Mormon from the angel Moroni he devoted his entire life to the organization of the Church and disseminating the truth. ... There was burning in his soul a knowledge such as Stephen had, such as the Redeemer had, that our Heavenly Father was at the helm, that it was his work that was upon the earth, that it was his power that would eventually control, that this life was but a part of eternity. He was prepared to give up a part of his earth-life, if need be, in order that he might enjoy eternally the companionship that he so sincerely loved, and the association of good men and women who have and do dwell upon the earth, and will again dwell upon the earth when it becomes the celestial kingdom.

Joseph Smith taught that he knew there was a hereafter, and that he knew that God lived, and that God knew that he knew that God lived. He was willing to give his life in order that you, my brethren and sisters, might have your faith strengthened and that your confidence in him might not be shaken. He knew the purpose of this life. He knew that we were here to prepare for the future and a more glorious existence. And he was willing, if need be, to give his own life, not simply that he might lose it, for our benefit, but because he knew that the Father had said that he who would

save his life should lose it, but he who would lose his life for His sake should find it, even life eternal. It was this knowledge that made it possible for the Prophet and [the] Patriarch of the Church [Hyrum Smith] in early days to [leave behind] loved ones, to be incarcerated in prison, and to give all that they had in this world, that men can give for their brethren—their mortal life.

14. Joseph and the growth of the Church (GAS)

In the year 1830, the Church was organized with six members. The adversary of all righteousness has from that day to the present sought to impede its progress and destroy it. I wonder if that great man, Joseph Smith, who gave his life that the Church might be organized and carried on as the Lord intended, can see the Church as it exists today, with its branches established in all parts of the world, and realize that each day since he was martyred, since he laid down his life and sealed his testimony with his blood, the Church has become stronger than the day before

Quotes

George Albert Smith: I say to all men everywhere, examine the teachings of the Gospel of our Lord as revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith, search them prayerfully, and you shall find the panacea for the ills of this world, and it will be discovered in no other way.

"Many of the benefits and blessings that have come to me have come through that man who gave his life for the gospel of Jesus Christ. There have been some who have belittled him, but I would like to say that those who have done so will be forgotten and their remains will go back to mother earth, if they have not already gone, ... and honor and majesty and courage and fidelity manifested by the Prophet Joseph Smith will attach to his name forever."

Elder Harold B. Lee ... was so impressed with this statement that he kept a clipping of it in his wallet and quoted it often, desiring that President Smith's words "could be heard to all the ends of the earth."

Sources: (lesson by Monte F. Shelley, www.sviewp.com)

- GAS = George Albert Smith, chapter 2 of lesson manual
- Schaff = Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*.
- Walker = Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* 3rd ed
- SER = Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians*
- *Imprimis* = www.hillsdale.edu
- MFS = Monte F. Shelley, New Testament Gospel Doctrine lesson #44, (www.sviewp.com)