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## What is Official Doctrine?

*[Stephen E. Robinson](#)  
[President Joseph Fielding Smith](#)*

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*by Stephen E. Robinson*

So what constitutes genuine Mormon doctrine? What is the LDS equivalent of "nihil obstat" and "imprimatur"? What *do* the Latter-day Saints believe? Can something be said to be "Mormon" doctrine if any Latter-day Saint anywhere believes it? If my LDS grandmother believed that frogs cause warts, or that the earth is flat, does that make those ideas LDS doctrine? If some LDS missionary somewhere believes that the earth is hollow and that the lost ten tribes are hiding inside, is his or her belief therefore LDS doctrine? Of course not.

Virtually every religion has procedures for distinguishing the individual beliefs of its members from the *official* doctrines of the church, and so do the Latter-day Saints. In fact among the Mormons the procedure is remarkably similar to that of many Protestant denominations. An example of the procedure can be taken from the records of the Fiftieth Semiannual General Conference of the [LDS church](#), 10 October 1880, when President George Q. Cannon addressed the conference:

I hold in my hand the Book of Doctrine and Covenants, and also the book, The Pearl of Great Price, which books contain revelations of God. In Kirtland, the Doctrine and Covenants in its original form, as first printed, was submitted to the officers of the Church and the members of the Church to vote upon. As there have been additions made to it by the publishing of revelations which were not contained in the original edition, it has been deemed wise to submit these books with their contents to the conference, *to see whether the conference will vote to accept the books and their contents as from God, and binding upon us as a people and as a Church.* 3

Subsequent changes of content in the standard works of the Church have been presented similarly to the membership in general conference to receive a sustaining vote. It is that sustaining vote, by the individual members or by their representatives, that makes the changes officially binding upon the membership as the doctrine of the Church. (See [The Seer and Journal of Discourses](#))

When Wilford Woodruff, as President of the Church, committed the Latter-day Saints to discontinue the practice of plural marriage, his official declaration was submitted to the Sixtieth Semiannual General Conference of the Church on 6 October 1890, which by unanimous vote accepted it "as authoritative and binding." It was that vote which made the document *official* (it is now printed as Official Declaration- 1 in the Doctrine and Covenants). Similarly, when President Spencer W. Kimball declared in 1978, by revelation from the Lord, that the priesthood was henceforward to be given to all worthy male members, this pronouncement became Official Declaration--2 by the sustaining vote of a general conference on 30 September 1978.

B. H. Roberts, a General Authority of the LDS church, summarized the issue perhaps as well as anyone has:

The Church has confined the sources of doctrine by which it is willing to be bound before the world to the things that God has revealed, and which the Church has officially accepted, and those alone. These would include the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price; these have been repeatedly accepted and endorsed by the Church in general conference assembled, *and are the only sources of absolute appeal for our doctrine.* 4

Of course it is true that many Latter-day Saints, from the Presidents of the Church and members of the Quorum of the Twelve down to individual members who may write books or articles, have expressed their own opinions on doctrinal matters. Nevertheless, until such opinions are presented to the Church in general conference and sustained by vote of the conference, they are neither binding nor the official doctrine of the Church. The critics of LDS doctrine seldom recognize this vital distinction. Rather, if any Latter-day Saint, especially one of the leading Brethren, ever said a thing, these critics take it to represent "Mormonism," regardless of the context of the particular statement and regardless of whether any other Latter-day Saint ever said it or believed it. Often the Latter-day Saints themselves are guilty of this same error and search through the *Journal of Discourses* as if it were some sort of Mormon Talmud, looking for "new" doctrines not found in the standard works and not taught in the Church today.

Usually the critics insist that the Latter-day Saints must defend as doctrine everything that [Joseph Smith](#) or Brigham Young or any other General Authority ever said. (See [Are Brigham Young's Sermon's Scripture](#)) But the LDS concept of doctrine simply cannot be stretched this far. The Latter-day Saints allow that sometimes the living prophet speaks in his role as prophet and sometimes he simply states his own opinions. This distinction is no different than that made in some other Christian denominations. For example, even though Roman Catholics believe in "papal infallibility," they insist that the pope is infallible only in certain clearly defined circumstances --when he speaks *ex cathedra* on matters of faith and morals. Cannot the Latter-day Saints be allowed a similar distinction? The LDS view was expressed succinctly by Joseph Smith himself: "I told them that a prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such."5

Non-Mormon critics, on the other hand, often insist that the Brethren must speak and write prophetically at *all* times. This absolutist expectation usually flows out of an extreme inerrantist view of prophecy and of scripture that is held by the critics, but not by the Latter-day Saints. The critics' belief in the Bible as absolutely perfect, without error and inspired in every word, leads them to make the same demands of anyone claiming to be a prophet. They would impose *their* inerrantist view on the Latter-day Saints and their prophets (see chapter 5 herein). But the Latter-day Saints have no such inerrantist views, neither of the scriptures nor of the prophets. The scriptures *are* the word of God, but only as far as they are translated correctly;6 and prophets sometimes speak for the Lord, and sometimes they express their own opinions. Certainly, if the Latter-day Saints were radical inerrantists, such a view as the foregoing would be a contradiction and a scandal, but since we are not inerrantists, the view scandalizes only our inerrantist critics. B. H. Roberts expressed it in this way: (See [Are Prophets Infallible?](#))

It is not sufficient to quote sayings purported to come from Joseph Smith or Brigham Young upon matters of doctrine. Our own people also need instruction and correction in respect of this. It is common to hear some of our older brethren say, "But I heard Brother Joseph myself say so," or "Brother Brigham preached it; I heard him." But that is not the question. The question is has God said it? Was the prophet speaking officially? . . .

As to the printed discourses of even leading brethren, the same principle holds. They do not constitute the court of ultimate appeal on doctrine. They may be very useful in the way of elucidation and are very generally good and sound in doctrine, but they are not the ultimate sources of the doctrines of the Church, and are not binding upon the Church. The rule in that respect is--What God has spoken, and what has been

accepted by the Church as the word of God, by that, and that only, are we bound in doctrine.<sup>7</sup>

In their encounters with anti-Mormon critics, quite often the Saints seem to feel constrained to defend too much. For example, the fact that Orson Pratt may have said such and such on this or that occasion does not make it a proposition that needs defending. Elder Pratt was very outspoken in his opinions, which sometimes disagreed with the opinions of other General Authorities. He was frequently instructed to make clear to his hearers or readers that his views were his own and not the doctrine of the Church; and on at least one occasion he was instructed by the President of the Church to recant publicly opinions he had represented as doctrine.<sup>8</sup>

Yet time and again the private opinions or even the half-serious speculations of Orson Pratt and others are presented in the literature of the anti-Mormons as mainstream LDS doctrine. The problem is compounded by some enthusiastic Latter-day Saints who themselves will not observe this distinction and insist on teaching the personal opinions and speculations of past leaders as though they were the official doctrines of the Church.

Now, none of this should be taken to mean that in matters of administration within the LDS church the General Authorities are not inspired or that they must submit every policy decision to the members for a sustaining vote. The revelations recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants, *already accepted* as binding by the Church, along with the ordination to their callings give the Brethren the keys and authority to administer the affairs of the Church as the Lord may direct without their needing a sustaining vote for each individual decision.<sup>9</sup> Thus the Church in conference sustains only the individuals who hold the keys, but does not need to sustain separately every detail of their administration. Consequently the policies and procedures of the Church are "official" and "inspired" whenever those holding the keys of that ministry unitedly declare them to be so. Similarly the revelations already accepted by the Church give to the General Authorities and to many others the right to "preach, teach, expound, exhort,"--that is, to interpret and apply *existing* doctrines within the context of their individual stewardships. The Brethren need no further license or sustaining vote to interpret, define, and apply the doctrines of the Church, or to administer the affairs of the Church and dictate its policies and procedures, than to be sustained in conference as prophets, seers, and revelators and as duly ordained members of their respective quorums.

Latter-day Saints believe that the General Authorities receive inspiration and revelation from God constantly in the administration of the affairs of the Church. They also believe that individuals within the Church may receive personal revelation, even on doctrinal matters, for their private benefit. When doctrinal revelation is given to such individuals, however, the Lord commands them to keep it to themselves (see Alma 12:9). Such revelation is not for the Church generally, but for that individual alone. No *new* doctrine is binding as the official doctrine of the Church unless it has been received by the President of the Church and until it has been sustained by the Church in general conference.

Finally, from an LDS point of view some things may be correct without being official Church doctrine. For example, it is probably true that the sum of the squares of the sides of a right triangle is equal to the square of its hypotenuse, but the Pythagorean theorem has never been sustained in a general conference of the Church. Similarly the doctrinal opinions of individual Latter-day Saints could very well turn out to be correct--and some such opinions are believed by many of the Saints --but that does not make them the official doctrine of the Church. This category of things that *may* be true and that are believed by some in the Church is confusing to members and nonmembers alike. Hence the Brethren have insisted again and again that the members avoid such speculative matters and teach only from the standard works, for only they contain the official doctrines of the Church.

For all of these reasons the only valid judgments of whether or not LDS doctrine is Christian must be based on the official doctrines of the Church, interpreted as the Latter-day Saints interpret them.

For Stephen E. Robinson's full comments, see [The Exclusion by Misrepresentation](#)

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by President Joseph Fielding Smith

*Question: "To what extent should the laymen of the Church accept as the absolute truth the statements which church authorities make in their books and sermons? Some members state that they are of no value only when quoted verbatim from the Standard Works. If this is so, where can we turn for guidance and detailed instruction about the finer points of our doctrines?"*

Answer: First it is in order to say that there should be no "laymen" in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. If there are any such, then they have neglected their responsibilities and obligations which the Lord has placed upon them. The Lord has restored his gospel and his priesthood, and it is the duty of every male member of the Church to know the truth, for each is entitled to the guidance of the Holy Ghost if he is faithful, and to be a bearer of the priesthood. Even the female members are under obligation to understand the doctrines of the Church and walk in them.

The Lord in speaking to Jeremiah in relation to the day in which we live made the following prediction:

"Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah; Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers, in the day that I took them by the hand, to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord. But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (Jeremiah 31:31-34.)

## **STANDARD WORKS ARE THE FOUNDATION OF OUR FAITH**

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. Moreover, the members of the Church are entitled, if they are fully keeping the commandments and covenants the Lord has given us, to have the spirit of discernment. 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, but when the Lord has spoken through his servant who holds the keys, there should be unity among the members of the Church.

## **A KEY TO UNDERSTANDING**

The Lord has given us a key by which we may be guided. It is found in Section 68 in the Doctrine and Covenants:

"And behold, and lo, this is an ensample unto all those who were ordained unto this priesthood, whose mission is appointed unto them to go forth--And this is the ensample unto them, that they

shall speak as they are moved upon by the Holy Ghost. And whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will of the Lord, shall be the mind of the Lord, shall be the word of the Lord, shall be the voice of the Lord, and the power of God, unto salvation." (D. & C. 68:2-5.)

There is nothing more important in the lives of members of the Church than to have the gift of the Holy Ghost. There is nothing of greater importance to the individual member of the Church than the gift of knowledge, and this does not come by observation but by constant study and faith. Each member holding the priesthood should be so well versed that the light of truth would be constantly in his heart. No authority of the Church when guided by the Holy Ghost will ever teach a doctrine that will be contrary to the revealed word of the Lord. He may express an opinion, a personal view, but in doing so he should so declare it. The writings of Paul were not sent forth to the saints in various parts of the world in their completeness as doctrine. There were times when Paul expressed his own opinion. The authorities of the Church have the same privilege, but when they do, they should make it perfectly clear that it is their personal view. When they have the inspiration of the Spirit of the Lord the members of the Church should likewise, by their faith and obedience, have the same Spirit. The Spirit of the Lord will bear witness to our spirits, under such conditions that what has been said is true.

### **MANY TRUTHS WOULD BE REVEALED**

There are many things that the Lord would reveal to his people, if they were prepared to receive them. He said to the members gathering in Missouri in the year 1831--

"Yea, blessed art they whose feet stand upon the land of Zion, who have obeyed my gospel; for they shall receive for their reward the good things of the earth, and it shall bring forth in its strength. And they shall also be crowned with blessings from above, yea, and with commandments not a few, and with revelations in their time--they that are faithful and diligent before me." (Ibid., 59:3-4.)

The Saints were not in all cases faithful and true, therefore these blessings were withheld, and we still wait for them.

Nevertheless let us remember that the Lord is guiding his people. He is giving them revelation and counsel for their guidance. The presiding brethren are teaching the divine truth and laboring under the direction of the Holy Spirit, and every member of the Church should be so in harmony with the Spirit of the Lord that he would be able to have the discernment and know if, at any time, something contrary to the revealed word is being taught.

One great difficulty today is that the world is turning away from God. Doctrines and theories are prevalent that are contrary to divine truth, and the word of the Lord to the members of the Church should be heeded today, perhaps more than ever before, lest the members be deceived and lose their faith.

"But ye are commanded in all things to ask of God, who giveth liberally; and that which the Spirit testifies unto you even so I would that ye should do in all holiness of heart, walking uprightly before me, considering the end of your salvation, doing all things with prayer and thanksgiving, that ye may not be seduced by evil spirits, or doctrines of devils, or the commandments of men; for some are of men, and others of devils. Wherefore, beware lest ye are deceived; and that ye may not be deceived seek ye earnestly the best gifts, always remembering for what they are given." (Ibid., 46:7-8)

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(See [Basic Beliefs](#) home page; [Church Organization and Priesthood Authority](#) home page; [Priesthood Organization](#) home page; [Following the Prophets](#) home page)

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