

Christianity and the Hope of the Future

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Dear President Holland, members of the faculty, and students of this great university of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I appreciate very much the invitation to speak to you today in this devotional hour. As I am not speaking in my native German tongue, I have a sincere prayer in my heart that the things I will say will be understandable to you and that we will be united in the Spirit of the Lord as I am expressing my views.

The other day I was watching a news broadcast on a local TV channel, and I witnessed a minister of one of the Protestant faiths making a blunt statement that Mormons cannot be considered as Christians. As I was pondering about this statement, my thoughts went back into the history of the Christian world and the always new questions: What is truth? Who is qualified or authorized to make judgment? Who is truly representing the Lord and His plan of salvation on this earth?

These questions are obviously of most significance, for the Lord, during His earthly ministry, made the statement, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me? (John 14:6). In His foreknowledge, Christ must have seen what would happen to the coming generations before He would be able to establish His kingdom on this earth, because He gave His disciples the

profound warning: “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves” (Matthew 7:15). He then explained how to find and identify His disciples:

Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?

Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.

A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.

Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

Wherefore, by their fruits ye shall know them.

[Matthew 7:16–20]

In light of the fact that some ministers of institutional churches want to deny us the right to be called Christian, I feel it would be appropriate to do some investigation into the history of Christianity to look for some clues for identification of the fruit we should be looking for. May I invite you, therefore, for a short review

F. Enzo Busche was a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 31 May 1983.

of history, perhaps not only in an effort to investigate or to identify the fruit we should be looking for, but perhaps in so doing, to also find the roots of the misery that challenges the very existence of mankind in our day.

When we look into the heritage of our Western culture, we find that we cannot separate our political history from the history of the institutional Christian churches. Both are inseparably connected and interwoven, and as we dare to look back and study the facts about the development of the Christian churches and nations over a period of nearly two thousand years, we understand that the wonderful message of Christ as it is found in Luke 2:14, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men,” has never been fulfilled.

As we ponder the facts of our daily lives in these days, it appears that this scripture is further from being fulfilled now than ever before. Even though we are not engaged in another full-gear war, the threat of an all-destroying potential future war overshadows the behavior and activities of mankind. At the same time, we are told that at present there are forty different wars in the world covering forty-five different nations and involving over five million soldiers, with fifty thousand killed just in the last year.

Looking at the roots of these wars or the threats of wars to come, it is simple to single out as one reason the denial of the people of the world—also, the people of the so-called Christian world—to pursue or even accept the commandment of Christ which He called the first and great commandment; namely, to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, and with all our souls, and with all our minds, and to love our neighbor as ourselves (*see* Matthew 22:37–39).

The absence of this principle of love, the obvious refusal to believe in this divine commandment, and even the perversion of it by giving it lip-service find roots in the very

beginning of institutional Christian churches. Through modern sources of research, the roots of the institutional churches of Christianity are no longer hidden in dark clouds of mystery. They are no longer subject to the exclusive interpretation of rulers in power. They are open and available for everyone who is able to read through publications written by careful, investigative historians and honest theologians to bring light, factual truth, and the possibility of understanding our situation today.

In our pursuit of this investigation, it seems appropriate to pronounce certain statements which illustrate dramatically the dilemma in which the world—and especially the Christian world—finds itself today. I want to draw your attention to the fact that today’s historians know, for instance, that the early disciples of Christ were of the opinion that Christ would return very soon, and they therefore omitted writing down in detail any reports for a period of one generation. When it became obvious that even the last witnesses of Christ’s words would die, the first writings were made. According to Karl Maly, a Catholic historian, not until the year A.D. 70 was the first attempt made to write the words and deeds of Jesus as a testimony and as a reason-giver for Christian belief.¹

Alfons Kemmer, another Catholic historian, writes that in the second half of the first century the first writings of the disciples, the apostles, appeared; and it is very important to know that the twenty-seven books that now comprise the canonical New Testament we find mentioned for the first time not earlier than the year A.D. 367. Kemmer also points out that no public pronouncement of official canonical scriptures was made until the year 1546 in the famous Concilium of Trient.²

Historians leave no question open that in the very early days of the development of Christian churches there were disputes without end about books, words, and interpretations. For instance, the Bible that was accepted by

Christian denominations during the period of the Reformation as the flawless, errorless word of God has received heavy critique by liberal and orthodox Christian theologians during the past hundred and fifty years. A mass of old and new manuscripts has been found, shedding more light upon the fact that from the very beginning of the Christian Church there were many different movements which were either heretical or called heretical by the established groupings. A new understanding has come forth that even the so-called canonical scriptures were established only under heavy contention.³ The questions concerning the errorless truths of the Bible started in the nineteenth century primarily among Protestant scientists.⁴ A textual criticism started with the awareness that all autographed books of the text had disappeared but that, on the other hand, newly found New Testament manuscripts, dating from the third to the eighteenth century, number altogether—

2,000 of the four Gospels,
400 of the Acts and the Pauline and
Catholic letters together,
300 Pauline letters alone, and
250 of Revelation.

It has been found through study of the manuscripts that no fewer than 150,000 textual variations are obvious, and even all copies that were available prior to the printing press in the fifteenth century show textual variations. Through study of the manuscripts it is also clear that no punctuation, no accents, and no breathing marks gave help for the translators.⁵

The heavy discussions and the number of new Bible translations from various translators and various churches in recent years finally made it necessary for even the Catholic Church to reevaluate its position. According to Alfons Kemmer, at the second Vaticanum that was called in November 1962, the so-called “battle of the Bible” arose. A minority wanted to have fixed the old teaching from St. Augustine that the Bible is flawless and all-comprehensive.

However, in the discussions that followed in the third and fourth periods of the concilium in 1964 and 1965 and after extensive debate, a compromise was finally found in a synthesis between traditional Bible understanding and modern Bible science. As a result in the second Vaticanum, a totally new translation of the Bible for the Catholic Church was authorized.⁶

Different opinions about the question, What is the established truth? arose very early in Christian history. The followers of Gnostic teachings, which were very widespread in the Roman empire for many centuries, emphasized the need for spiritual knowledge of truth and that such knowledge would be essential for salvation.⁷ The followers of Marcion (who died in the year A.D. 160) stressed the necessity for humans to develop charity as the Lord’s saving power.⁸ The Montanists, at the end of the second century, stressed the need for self-discipline. Their women, for instance, were required to wear veils.⁹

Of course, it is not possible to make even an attempt to mention all the various groups and developments in this brief summary, and I shall therefore concentrate on some of the most important and interesting ones.

The followers of Origenes (who died in A.D. 254) supported the idea that to be a disciple of Christ, one would need to be an example in deed, in language, and daily behavior.¹⁰

Arius, who lived in the days of the Concilium of Nicaea and who converted multitudes of people to Christianity, believed the Father and the Son to be two different personages, being therefore in contrast to the Nicene Creed.¹¹

In A.D. 418 Pelagius, a Roman citizen of British origin, was teaching the free agency of the children of God, and, of course, he clashed with the prevailing predestination teaching of Augustine.¹²

Later, when Christianity had spread over all the western European continent and the Catholic Church was established in dominance,

there were still many people and groups who claimed to be inspired and who were in open opposition to the established church. There were the Cathari, for instance, who did not believe in the worship of the bones of early Christian martyrs and who tried to take the scriptures seriously.¹³ This group began to be prominent in the tenth century. Then there were the followers of a man called Peter Waldo who lived in Lyons, France, who believed that a priest of the Lord should be righteous and have high standards of morality.¹⁴ In the fourteenth century in Germany there originated the Begins and the Begards, who believed that a man can become perfect when he strives to receive the gifts of the Spirit.¹⁵ Also originating in the same fourteenth century in Germany were the Salpeterer, who asked for a separation of worldly and church power.¹⁶

John Wycliffe from England and John Huss from Bohemia can be considered as the forerunners of the Reformation. Finally, with Martin Luther (whose five hundredth birthday is celebrated this year), Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin, the Reformation came to pass. But the Reformation did not bring a united, new understanding of truth. On the contrary, it opened up only a fullness of new interpretations, new understandings, and, of course, new disputes.

There were, for instance, the followers of Thomas Muenzer, who requested to separate the church from the state, and whose disciples even established a city which they called New Jerusalem. They refused to believe in the baptism of small children and were therefore called Anabaptists.¹⁷ One could consider them to be an early forerunner of the now-established Baptists.

The Reformation brought in England the development of the Puritans, who wanted to confine themselves to the pure contents of the gospel and who finally became the founding fathers of the Presbyterians, the Congregationalists, and some of the Reformed Churches.¹⁸

This investigation that we have just made can, of course, show only major developments in interpretations of Christian beliefs, but I think that the following statement can be made without the risk of being controversial: **The message of Christ and His gospel became subject, soon after His resurrection, to various, extremely controversial interpretations; and the question, What is truth? has continued to be controversial up to this day.**

When we investigate another aspect of the history of Christian churches, it is obvious that modern historians have come to the astonishing observation and conclusion that what we understand today as Christianity reflects the outcome of interpretations of respective powers in charge strong enough to suppress differing opinions.

The struggle that occurred in the first centuries after Christ's resurrection as to which of the various opinions were right and what were the true ingredients of salvation began to come to a forceful end when the Roman Emperor Constantine called, in the year A.D. 325, selected bishops from various Christian positions to come to the so-called Concilium of Nicaea about which the Catholic historian, Karl Kupisch, writes:

*From the 4,000 bishops that existed, only 250 came. From all of western Europe only four bishops were present. The bishop from Rome was not present. Constantine himself did not subject himself to be questioned as to who was the master of the conference. His ideas and his concepts were accepted.*¹⁹

According to this same author, the Nicene Creed became the law of the Roman empire, and orthodox Christianity became the essential ingredient of good Roman citizenship. The need for the Roman emperor to have unity among his various appendages made Christianity the tool to establish this unity through the power of force; and the Christians,

who had just escaped persecution over the first centuries after the resurrection of Christ, became now themselves the oppressors, paired with the power of the Roman Empire.

With the coronation of the Frankish King Charlemagne in the year 800 as the emperor of the Roman Empire, for the first time a secular leader took total leadership over the now established Catholic Church. He decided who became bishop, and the state of God was erected, which meant that the emperor interpreted himself to be God's representative. Service toward the emperor was considered service toward God. Under such circumstances Christianity was declared as an instrument of worldly power and rulership.²⁰

This combination of worldly rulership and the medieval church lasted until recent years, but even the early churches of the Reformation were seeking and welcoming this kind of pact with worldly powers and institutions.

In view of the just-mentioned examples, which can be easily checked through reading appropriate historical findings, I want to establish statement number 2: **Over a period of centuries there were only those interpretations of the gospel prevailing which were linked with the strongest literal political powers, and it is easy to see that these powers of leadership in Christianity could not be kept free from wickedness, injustice, and unrighteousness.**

As we investigate the roots of our history and therefore come to understand the situation of our own day, we cannot neglect or overlook one aspect that can be considered most tragic and fatal. Obviously there were, over the years, many righteous individuals who tried to establish the knowledge of Christ's teachings through righteous living and through the example of the sacrifice of love, but it can also be observed that institutional Christianity used the means of brutal suppression to destroy opposing positions and to persecute and even kill various believers in differing interpretations of Christianity. Very few people today

recall, for instance, that Thodosius, the Roman emperor who was called "the Great," made it possible for the Nicene Creed to survive by killing thirty thousand Arian Christians in one single night in a Roman amphitheater. (Remember, the Arian Christians were those who believed that God the Father and God the Son are two different personages.)²¹ Together with a multitude of similar acts supposedly "teaching the truth," this massacre can be looked upon as an example of how unity of interpretation of the gospel was enforced, and historians of our day do not hesitate to say that what was good to serve the purpose of the state was declared to be ecclesiastical truth.

Several hundred years later, Charlemagne was very zealous in establishing Christianity as a unifying power in his kingdom, and when the Saxons were obviously not quick enough to subdue themselves to the emperor's will and become Christians, he invited, in the year 782, forty-five hundred noble sons of the Saxons to a meeting in Verden an der Aller. It is a historical fact that all of them were killed.²² This was the introduction of Christianity to my own personal ancestors.

The orthodox church of the Middle Ages established instruments called "the Inquisition" just for the single purpose of searching for individuals or groups who were not in full obedience and harmony with the established understanding of truth. The Cathari, the Waldenses, the Begins and the Begards, the Salpeterer, and many others were persecuted and delivered up to their deaths, some of them up to the very last person. John Huss, the Bohemian theologian who established the motto, "Search the truth, listen to the truth, learn the truth, love the truth, remain true to the truth, defend the truth until death," was burned, and his ashes were scattered in the Rhine River.²³ William Tyndale, who was the first to translate and to print the Bible in the English language, doing so because he felt it necessary that people learn to read and study

the scriptures themselves, was persecuted and finally brought to his death by church authorities.

It cannot be said that the Reformation brought a change in attitude, for as soon as the Reformation became established in various places, the reformers themselves and their followers turned to identifying and searching for heretics—those people who were “different,” and so easily called by them “devilish.” As was the medieval church, the reformers and their followers were also not afraid to bring these so-called “heretics” to their painful deaths.

Time will not permit talking about the many wars caused by religion—with millions of people losing their lives. But the dreadful night of St. Bartholomew has to be mentioned, when thirteen thousand Huguenots were killed in France in one night—men, women, and children.²⁴ Also, the dreadful ending of the city of New Jerusalem, which was established in the city of Muenster by the Anabaptists, must be mentioned, where nearly all of the city’s inhabitants were killed and three of their leaders were placed in iron cages and hoisted to the top of the Lamberti church until they died.²⁵ It is interesting to know that the cages are still hanging there. The remnants of the Anabaptists were later organized by a man named Menno Simons and were called the Mennonites.²⁶

A very tragic chapter in the perversion of the Christian religion is found lasting up to recent times when individuals who were not liked or who caused a problem of some kind in the eyes of the authorities were called “witches” and were treated without mercy. It is recorded that in Germany alone just in the seventeenth century no fewer than three hundred thousand people accused of witchcraft were put to death by burning or beheading.²⁷

I just want to mention briefly in this account the arrogant, brutal crusades to the Orient, and here, on this continent, the disgraceful persecution of the American Indians.

I think I can say without being accused of exaggeration what I want to formulate as statement number 3: **There is a long history in Christianity of intolerance toward those holding different opinions, of defaming them as “devilish heretics,” of persecuting them, and even to literally putting them to death.**

After all that we have now heard, the conclusion can be drawn that we humans must fail when we try to interpret what *we* consider to be gospel truth without relying on a living prophet and divine revelation. The scriptures which for centuries were considered to be literally the flawless word of God have become very questionable through the critique of modern historians. The discovery of the suppression of early Christian developments and the other “fruit” of historical Christianity has been an eye-opening, frustrating experience for the people of our day.

As early as the late seventeenth century, Roger Williams, who was one of the founding fathers of the modern-day Baptists, made the statement, “The church of Christ is not on earth until Christ sends forth new apostles to plant churches anew.” The same Roger Williams termed it “blasphemy” to call Europe “Christian.”²⁸

Even when it is obvious that humans cannot interpret by themselves what is divine truth, thousands of honest, righteous, and humble people created their own circles of prayer and became the authors of hundreds of different Christian beliefs. With the establishment of the Constitution of the United States, a place of dreams, a place of hope was given to the oppressed and frustrated truth-seeking Europeans. With their immigration to the new continent, the soil was prepared for the Lord himself once again, in answer to a young lad’s prayer, to restore the true order of the Priesthood of God and the knowledge of the true interpretation and understanding of the plan of salvation.

My dear brothers and sisters, it is not surprising that the restoration of the truth has brought suspicion, envy, and fear to the leaders of established Christian churches. The early members of the restored Church, which Jesus Christ called “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” had to go through many of the same experiences as those brave souls who preceded them throughout the history of Christianity, for they were persecuted, oppressed, and driven from their homes from Kirtland to Missouri and then onward to the Mississippi River. When the first prophet of the Restoration in these days, even the Prophet Joseph Smith, was brought to a martyr’s death, the disciples of the Lord in His church showed the fruit of their faith, leaving their homes again and crossing the plains, the wilderness, and the roadless mountains to settle in the salt desert of the West.

In order to understand the Restoration fully, we have to become aware of the tragedy of Christian history—not in the spirit of creating ill feelings or passing judgment, but to understand that for the first time since shortly after the death of the early disciples of Christ, we have the gospel in its entire purity, undefiled by human ambition and without human interpretation. For us it is very simple to understand why hundreds of millions of people in this world of turmoil and fear have lost their hope that Christianity might be the answer.

It seems to be an interesting fact that in the same year that the pioneers of the restored Church were spending their first Christmas in their humble quarters in the wilderness in the West in 1847, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were writing their *Communist Manifesto*.²⁹ It is not difficult to find, in studying the lives of Marx and Engels, that this manifesto is their expression of outraged indignation over established religion and established Christian churches.³⁰ The intention of the writers of this manifesto was obviously to bring to pass dignity, equality, and brotherhood of all mankind;

and the dreams, hopes, and visions of millions of our Heavenly Father’s children were stirred up.

Brothers and sisters, we do not stand here because Joseph Smith had an idea or Brigham Young had ambitious plans. We are standing here because we have been converted to the gospel of Jesus Christ as He himself has again established it in these days. The power and the dignity of the priesthood have been restored, the keys to preach the gospel of repentance for the remission of sins have been given again, and all mankind will have the opportunity to hear this message with an invitation to make a covenant with the Lord. We are living witnesses of this restoration! With this we have a sacred obligation to shed forth a new light, a new understanding, and to show through our lives the fruit of the Spirit, that our hearts and minds will not be stirred up to defensiveness as we are offended or abused, as we are threatened or called “devilish,” for we know from whence such torment comes.

Yes, we have received a new light, which is the old and everlasting light, as we have received the keys to the powers of the Holy Spirit. With these powers from above it is our role to learn to love every one of our Heavenly Father’s children and not, in turn, to label as “devilish” someone who is different, but to learn to be concerned only about the influence the adversary can have in our own lives. In so doing, we can learn to make the love of Christ the strongest power in this world, that through His love emanating through His disciples, eventually nations will be penetrated with new hope and new light, that the ballast of prejudice, ignorance, hate, deception, and fear that still burdens relationships of people and nations can be overcome.

I have the hope and the prayer in my heart that through this message of the restored gospel of Christ and the radiation of its fruits, the fruit of historical so-called “Christian” behavior that literally threatens the very

existence of mankind today can be eliminated and that eventually future wars can be avoided. My prayer is that we will learn to respect one another, to trust one another, and to look at one another as brothers and sisters and as children of the same heavenly Father. My prayer is that the ultimate goal of Jesus the Christ can soon be established: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will toward men.”

This is my testimony, and I leave it with you in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Notes

1. Karl Maly, *Wie entstand das Neue Testament*, 3d ed. (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk GmbH, 1981), pp. 41–42.
2. Alfons Kemmer, *Das Neue Testament Eine Einfuehrang fuer Laien*, 3d edition, 1980 (Germany: Verlag Herder Freiburg im Breisgau, 1976), pp. 16–17.
3. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. “biblical literature.”
4. Maly, *Wie entstand das Neue Testament*, p. 47.
5. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. “biblical literature.”
6. Kemmer, *Das Neue Testament*, pp. 22–23.
7. Karl Kupisch, *Kirchengeschichte*, 1978 ed., vol. 1 (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer GmbH.), pp. 30, 38, 39.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 30–31.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 38–39.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 114–116.
13. Horst Herrmann, *Ketzer in Deutschland*, edition #7185 (Muenchen, Germany: Verlag Wilhelm Heyne, copyright Kiepenheuer und Witsch, Koeln, 1982), pp. 124–125.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 273–275.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 184–188.
18. Daryl Chase, *Christianity through the Centuries* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1944), p. 155.
19. Kupisch, *Kirchengeschichte*, vol. 1, pp. 72–73.
20. Rudolph Wahl, *Karl der Grosse* (Muenchen: Verlag Bruckmann, 1978), pp. 102, 208, 293.
21. Herrmann, *Ketzer*, p. 66. Disputed by Karl Kupisch. According to Kupisch, this killing of 30,000 Arians to save the Nicene Creed happened in the rulership of Justinian (A.D. 527–565). See Kupisch, *Kirchengeschichte*, vol. 1, p. 135.
22. Kupisch, *Kirchengeschichte*, vol. 1, p. 148.
23. Herrmann, *Ketzer*, p. 32.
24. Kupisch, *Kirchengeschichte*, 1975 edition, vol. 4 (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer GmbH.), p. 43.
25. Herrmann, *Ketzer*, pp. 184–188. See also Kupisch, *Kirchengeschichte*, 1974 ed., vol. 3 (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer GmbH.), p. 131.
26. Kupisch, *Kirchengeschichte*, vol. 3, p. 132. See also Barbara Beuys, *Und wenn die Welt voll Teufel waer* (Hamburg: Verlag Rowohlt, 1982), p. 269.
27. Herrmann, *Ketzer*, p. 228.
28. Chase, *Christianity*, pp. 202–203.
29. Guenter Brakelmann, *Kirche in Konflikten ihrer Zeit*, 1981 ed. (Muenchen: Chr. Kaiser Verlag), p. 29.
30. Friedrich Friedenthal, *Karl Marx* (Muenchen and Zuerich: Piper & Co.).