

The Doctrine and Covenants— A Scripture for All Seasons

LOREN C. DUNN

The Doctrine and Covenants should be one of the most important volumes in our lives. Let me share with you a statement from President Harold B. Lee:

*I say that we need to teach our people to find their answers in the scriptures. . . . But the unfortunate thing is that so many of us are not reading the scriptures. We do not know what is in them, and therefore we speculate about the things that we ought to have found in the scriptures themselves. I think that therein is one of our biggest dangers of today. [Harold B. Lee, *Ensign*, December 1972, p. 3]*

The Doctrine and Covenants should be dear to us, as Latter-day Saints, for at least two reasons.

First, it contains revelations provided for us in our day. The other scriptures are also of great value to us, but they spoke to people of other generations in other days. The Doctrine and Covenants is our scripture, directed specifically to our generation.

Second, it is the only volume of scripture that includes as its introduction a revelation given by the Lord for that purpose. The preface, or first section of the Doctrine and Covenants, is a revelation from the Lord introducing the

Doctrine and Covenants. Listen to these great and sacred words from section one:

Hearken, O ye people of my church, saith the voice of him who dwells on high, and whose eyes are upon all men; yea, verily I say: Hearken ye people from afar; and ye that are upon the islands of the sea, listen together.

For verily the voice of the Lord is unto all men, and there is none to escape; and there is no eye that shall not see, neither ear that shall not hear, neither heart that shall not be penetrated. [D&C 1:1–2]

Our Book of Commandments

Originally called the Book of Commandments, the Doctrine and Covenants is a compilation of revelations, mostly given during the period from 1823 to 1847. However, the most recent additions to this volume were made in 1981. It covers the rise and the development of the restored Church in our day. The revelations were gathered for publication by a

Loren C. Dunn 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 12 March 1985.

committee chaired by Joseph Smith and were presented to a general assembly of the Church in Kirtland in August 1835. Not only was the volume of scripture accepted at that time, but various groups of the Church bore witness that the revelations came from the Lord.

Elder John A. Widtsoe tells us that the divine being speaking to us in the Doctrine and Covenants is Jesus of Nazareth. Apparently the Father does not speak in these revelations. He speaks through the Son. It is a fundamental doctrine of this Church that the Father has commissioned his Son, Jesus Christ, to look after the affairs of the earth and that all things pertaining to the Church are done by him. Although we pray to the Father in the name of the Son, the Son is the person who speaks to us in the Doctrine and Covenants.

Some of the revelations are actually words spoken by heavenly beings. Many of the revelations are in the language of Joseph Smith and succeeding prophets. The ideas and impressions were given to them by the Holy Ghost and they were written in the best language at their command. The value of these revelations to all Latter-day Saints and to the entire world is clear. Listen to this from the first section:

Search these commandments, for they are true and faithful, and the prophecies and promises which are in them shall all be fulfilled. [D&C 1:37]

Says Heber J. Grant concerning the Doctrine and Covenants:

I wish that I had the ability to impress upon the Latter-day Saints the necessity of searching the commandments of God, the revelations from the Lord, the Creator of heaven and earth, as contained in the Doctrine and Covenants. If we as a people would live up to those wonderful revelations that have come to us, we would be a bright and shining light to all the wide world. [Heber J. Grant, CR, October 1927, p. 4]

Also, in the introduction of the Doctrine and Covenants, we read these words:

Although most of the sections are directed to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the messages, warnings, and exhortations are for the benefit of all mankind, and contain an invitation to all people everywhere to hear the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ, speaking to them for their temporal well-being and their everlasting salvation. . . . In the revelations one hears the tender but firm voice of the Lord Jesus Christ, speaking anew in the dispensation of the fulness of times; and the work that is initiated herein is preparatory to his second coming, in fulfillment of and in concert with the words of all the holy prophets since the world began. [D&C, Explanatory Introduction]

Within the inspired pages of this volume of sacred scripture is the doctrinal foundation of what we stand for and what we do as a church. It not only teaches the basic doctrines upon which the Church is founded, but, as the seeker of truth reads and studies and prays, the Holy Ghost will bear witness to that person of its truthfulness.

Question: We are all acquainted with the practice of convening in stake conferences. Where did that practice originate?

Answer: From D&C 20:61.

The several elders composing this church of Christ are to meet in conference once in three months, or from time to time as said conferences shall direct or appoint.

Verse 81 of that section tells what should happen at those conferences.

Question: Although mentioned in various scriptures, where did the specific practice of administering to the sick come from in this dispensation?

Answer: From D&C 42.

And the elders of the church, two or more, shall be called, and shall pray for and lay their hands upon them in my name; and if they die they shall die unto me, and if they live they shall live unto me. [D&C 42:44]

This scripture goes on to say that should they die, death will be sweet to them and they will not taste of death as such.

So it goes—principle after principle and practice after practice are outlined for the Church by the Savior and recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants.

Revelation for All Times

We do not practice parts of the Doctrine and Covenants today. The law of consecration is not lived today in its fulness. Polygamy was given by revelation and taken away by revelation. From 2 Peter 1:20–21 we read:

Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation.

For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.

From this we learn that holy men are to interpret scriptures for the Church, and this will supersede all private interpretations by individuals or groups. These holy men of today are the First Presidency, who, as the presiding high priests of the Church, have the right of officiating in all offices in the Church.

Following the guidance of the living prophet is the key to understanding scripture and what the Lord requires of us in this day and age. No person can call another person or himself to act in behalf of the Church without being called and duly authorized. This is from section 42:

Again I say unto you, that it shall not be given to anyone to go forth to preach my gospel, or to build up my church, except he be ordained by some one

who has authority, and it is known to the church that he has authority and has been regularly ordained by the heads of the church. [D&C 42: 11]

What about our everyday problems? How does this great volume of scripture deal with the challenges we face each day of our lives? More and more, we are finding that many young people and even older people are suffering from the overriding feelings of guilt in their lives. If anything goes wrong, they look for immediate causes and end up blaming themselves or someone else.

“I’m not dating, so I’m not attractive enough” or “My inner self is not what it should be.” The result is guilt.

“My parents are not getting along,” or “My parents are divorced,” or “Somehow it must have been something I did or did not do.” The result is guilt.

“We want to have children and we can’t. It must be punishment for something I have or haven’t done.” The result is guilt.

“I want a happy-ever-after life. I have been trying to follow a list of things that will make me happy, but the trials keep coming, and I’m not always happy.” The result is blaming myself or someone else.

“How come my problems aren’t getting solved? If the gospel is the gospel of healing and peace, why hasn’t more of it come to me?” These questions go on and on with some.

Let’s turn to the life of Mary Fielding Smith, wife of Hyrum Smith. This was her first marriage and his second. She came into a family where five children were left without a mother when the first wife died. By June 1839 Mary and Hyrum had been married for eighteen months. During that short period they had been driven from two homes, Hyrum had been imprisoned for six months, Mary had been bedridden for four months with a pregnancy, and now, without financial resources, they were struggling to establish another home. Listen to this excerpt written at the time by Mary to her brother Joseph Fielding:

*It is now little more than a month since the Lord, in his marvelous power, returned my dear husband, with the rest of the brethren, to their families, in tolerable health. We are now living in Commerce, on the bank of the great Mississippi river. The situation is very pleasant; you would be much pleased to see it. How long we may be permitted to enjoy it I know not; but the Lord knows what is best for us. I feel but little concern about where I am, if I can keep my mind staid upon God; for, you know in this there is perfect peace. [Don Cecil Corbett, *Mary Fielding Smith, Daughter of Britain; Portrait of Courage* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Co., 1966), p. 99]*

Let us go to the imprisonment that Mary spoke of. It was in Liberty Jail that the prayer and prophecies in sections 121 and 122 were written. Meeting frustrations and problems that do not seem to go away is not only a problem that we face from time to time, but the Prophet Joseph also suffered such adversity as these verses will attest. (Remember now that they had been in jail for months without the opportunity of due process. Their living conditions were horrible.)

O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place?

How long shall thy hand be stayed, and thine eye, yea thy pure eye, behold from the eternal heavens the wrongs of thy people and of thy servants, and thine ear be penetrated with their cries? . . .

Remember thy suffering saints, O our God; and thy servants will rejoice in thy name forever. [D&C 121:1–2, 6]

Part of the answer to that prayer comes in section 122. Note that the Lord did not say to Joseph that the afflictions would be lifted, but instead he said that, in fact, it could get worse. The Lord also told Joseph that his friends still stood with him. He pointed out that this whole process was for the purpose of giving him

experience. Trials are necessary to become like the Savior, whose name we have taken upon ourselves at baptism.

And if thou shouldst be cast into the pit, or into the hands of murderers, and the sentence of death passed upon thee; and if thou be cast into the deep; if the billowing surge conspire against thee; if fierce winds become thine enemy; if the heavens gather blackness, and all the elements combine to hedge up the way; and above all, if the very jaws of hell shall gape open the mouth wide after thee, know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good. . . .

Therefore, hold on thy way, . . . for their bounds are set, they cannot pass. Thy days are known, and thy years shall not be numbered less; therefore, fear not what man can do, for God shall be with you forever and ever. [D&C 122:7, 9]

The message? Well, we should not be going out looking for problems. But one reason we are here in this life is to gain experience. This comes from meeting and overcoming trials. Just as the Savior met his trials, so we must meet our trials if eventually we are to become like him. Living the gospel does not always make the problems go away, but it can and does give us purpose and has the power to give us peace and healing as we meet our own trials.

The Importance of Developing Faith

Some people want quick and easy answers for everything, but this desire works directly against the development of the principle of faith. Without faith it is impossible to please God (see Hebrews 11:6). If we are going to do the best we can, maybe it is not so important how things turn out as how we meet a particular trial. Maybe the important thing is how we act as we are going through the difficulty—how we pray, how we keep our covenants, how we treat one another, whom we try to blame, how well we forgive ourselves and others—and then move onward.

The Lord offers the kind of peace and joy and healing that keeps us going and gives us purpose and direction, but maybe all our problems do not get solved. Some live with the same burdens and trials for a lifetime, but in the process they develop in their lives the kind of peace the gospel has to offer and the kind our friend Mary Fielding Smith made mention of.

Is this not the message we get from these passages:

Be patient in afflictions, for thou shalt have many; but endure them, for, lo, I am with thee, even unto the end of thy days. [D&C 24:8]

Be patient in afflictions, revile not against those that revile. Govern your house in meekness, and be steadfast. [D&C 31:9]

For I will forgive you of your sins with this commandment—that you remain steadfast in your minds in solemnity and the spirit of prayer. [D&C 84:61]

The Doctrine and Covenants will lead to a solution of our problems as we face them from day to day.

Although our Father in Heaven cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance, nevertheless we are his sons and daughters and in his eyes we are of great value.

We are told in D&C 18:10 to “remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God.” This worth is constant and does not depend on how much we accomplish or how popular we are or how many honors we attain in life. We do not become more worthwhile by accomplishing more, and we do not become less worthwhile by accomplishing less. Our worth before God is not dependent upon what we accomplish. You may not be the most popular person on campus and you may not be BYU’s next starting quarterback. You may not be getting a 4.0 this semester. But these are not connected with your worth. Your worth is great.

If you sin, the Lord does not want you to hate yourself, for you are one of his creations. Hate the sin, but do not hate yourself.

The principle of repentance is not merely the process that those few go through who really have problems. For one who has taken upon himself the name of Christ, repentance is a way of life. Repentance means progress. Repentance is a means of lifting the burden. Repentance is healing. Repentance is peace. Repentance, properly directed, is the means the Lord has given us to bring us within the circle of the Atonement. It can lift us from our sins and make us whole again. Perhaps it is not well enough understood. Listen to this definition found in the Bible dictionary:

The Greek word of which this is the translation denotes a change of mind, i.e., a fresh view about God, about oneself, and about the world. Since we are born into conditions of mortality, repentance comes to mean a turning of the heart and will to God, and a renunciation of sin to which we are naturally inclined. Without this there can be no progress.

With this in mind, consider again these scriptures:

Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God;

For, behold, the Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh; wherefore he suffered the pain of all men, that all men might repent and come unto him.

And he hath risen again from the dead, that he might bring all men unto him, on conditions of repentance.

And how great is his joy in the soul that repenteth! [D&C 18:10–13]

Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more.

By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins—behold, he will confess them and forsake them. [D&C 58:42–43]

Nevertheless, he that repents and does the commandments of the Lord shall be forgiven. [D&C 1:32]

As the great tapestry of revelation unfolds in the Doctrine and Covenants, we come to know a Savior who has suffered for all of us. He took upon himself our sins, and his suffering is effectual for us if we would but come to him. He understands about our weaknesses, and he takes into account the intent of our hearts. The important thing is that none of us must ever stop the ongoing process of repentance. Some things may have to be worked at again and again before they are out of our lives. He is only displeased with us when we stop trying.

Receiving Personal Revelation

No volume of scripture spells out how to receive personal revelation from the Lord any better than does the Doctrine and Covenants. A pattern is established for all of us in these words to Oliver Cowdery:

Oliver Cowdery, verily, verily, I say unto you, that assuredly as the Lord liveth, who is your God and your Redeemer, even so surely shall you receive a knowledge of whatsoever things you shall ask in faith, with an honest heart, believing that you shall receive. . . .

Yea, behold, I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart.

Now, behold, this is the spirit of revelation. [D&C 8:1–3]

But the Lord also told Oliver Cowdery:

Remember that without faith you can do nothing; therefore ask in faith. Trifle not with these

things; do not ask for that which you ought not. [D&C 8:10]

The Lord more carefully defines this process in a further revelation to Oliver Cowdery. Note the different ways that he says he will convey his mind and will:

Behold, thou knowest that thou hast inquired of me and I did enlighten thy mind; and now I tell thee these things that thou mayest know that thou hast been enlightened by the Spirit of truth; . . .

Verily, verily, I say unto you, if you desire a further witness, cast your mind upon the night that you cried unto me in your heart, that you might know concerning the truth of these things.

Did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? What greater witness can you have than from God? [D&C 6:15, 22–23]

Also to Oliver Cowdery, these words were spoken:

But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.

But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong. [D&C 9:8–9]

How will you know if the Lord is speaking to you? He tells us three ways in these revelations. He will speak peace to your mind, he will enlighten your mind, and he will cause that your bosom shall burn within you. He says that the answer will come to your mind and to your heart.

What are the preparations you must make according to these revelations? You must study it out in your mind and you must ask in prayer. Actually it is more than just asking—the words say, “cry unto me in your heart that

you might know the truth concerning these things." It is one thing to ask and it is another thing to truly humble yourself and with all the energy of your soul cry unto Heavenly Father in your heart that you might know the truth.

This is not your only preparation. The Lord also says that you must ask in faith with an honest heart, believing that you shall receive. In other words, you know he will answer you. And when he does, you must be honest enough to act on that answer. You will humbly and earnestly inquire until the answer comes.

The Lord also says this process is very sacred; you must not trifle with it or speak of it lightly. You should be thoughtful enough not to ask for things that you should not ask for.

How do you receive a "no" answer? What kind of an experience is that? Well, there will be no such burning feelings and/or there will be a stupor of thought and you will forget the thing that you have asked about.

So, on one hand will come the feelings of peace and warmth and assurance, and on the other hand there will be either nothing or feelings of radical misgivings. President Marion G. Romney describes the process in this way:

*In praying, I try to follow the teachings of these scriptures. When confronted with a problem I prayerfully weigh in my mind alternative solutions and come to a conclusion as to which of them is best. Then in prayer I submit to the Lord my problem, tell him I desire to make the right choice, what is, in my judgment, the right course. Then I ask him if I have made the right decision to give me the burning in my bosom that He promised Oliver Cowdery. When enlightenment and peace come into my mind, I know the Lord is saying yes. If I have a "stupor of thought," I know he is saying no, and I try again, following the same procedure. [Marion G. Romney, *The New Era*, October 1975, p. 35]*

A Divine Invitation

As a sort of second witness to receiving revelation, the Lord has given us the scriptures

and the words of the living prophet and also the opportunity to counsel with our local priesthood leaders about matters. The Lord is not divided. He will not tell his Church to do one thing and an individual to do something else. This very clear and sacred process of receiving answers to prayers is ours because we have the Doctrine and Covenants.

The Doctrine and Covenants is a divine invitation to come to a knowledge of the Father and the Son, to understand better the role of the Lord as Savior and Redeemer and as the author of our salvation, to understand why his Church is organized the way it is and what its divine mission is to the people of the world. This sacred book also enables us to follow the tender watchful care of God over the infant Church during its days of numerical weakness when it was first getting started.

For one who will faithfully and prayerfully read this great volume of scripture, there will come into his heart a greater witness and love for God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. Greater peace and understanding will come and greater determination in fulfilling the divine calls that come to us to serve in the Church.

Just as we see the tender watchful care of the Lord over the infant Church, so will we begin to see with greater clarity the tender watchful care of the Lord in our own individual lives and how he carefully leads us through the trials and challenges of this mortal probation.

The Doctrine and Covenants has been written for us in our day. It is one of the standard works. It provides us an opportunity to know and understand deity in a most personal and direct way.

May the Lord bless us that we will take advantage of that which he has revealed to us and understand it and put it into our lives.

I bear you my witness that this work is true, that God does live, that Jesus is the Christ, and that they have revealed to us their words, their mind, and their will so that we may live in the

world but not needlessly suffer the pains and
ills of the world, in the name of Jesus Christ.
Amen.