

Insights on Church Leadership

Marcus H. Martins, Ph.D.
Brigham Young University - Hawaii

Copyright © 1993, 1999, 2001 (web edition)
by Marcus H. Martins
All Rights Reserved

This text may be printed or copied for incidental home or Church use
This is not an official publication of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

The True Doctrine

So far we have discussed the benefits of having some knowledge of the basic doctrines of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ and the potential harm that can be caused by the lack of this knowledge. Now, we'll focus on what specific knowledge we must possess, and how we can obtain it.

In his first vision the prophet Joseph Smith was commanded not to join any of the churches of his day, and the Savior himself told him the reason: "I was answered that ... they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight ... that: 'they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.'"

We can gain many insights from these words. At this time we'll concentrate on two of them: first, that the Lord was particularly displeased with the fact that the hearts of the people were not centered on him, and secondly, that the people denied his power. What do these things mean, and why are they so important?

The hearts of the people were not centered on the Lord because they didn't know him; in fact, most of Christianity still believes that God is a spirit that has no body, parts or passions. If God has no passions, how could anyone be loved by him? How could anyone develop a personal relationship with a mere "spiritual essence" that has no body or parts? Would anyone sacrifice him or herself to keep commandments ordered by a spiritual "essence" or "entity" that has no feelings?

If God were only a spiritual essence, with no passions or feelings, our love for him would never be as deep as the love children have for their fathers; it would be just like loving the wind: we can feel the wind blowing, and we may even say that we "love" it, but there is no personal, affectionate relationship between us and the wind, because the wind has no body, no parts, no passions, and therefore, no cognition. If God had no passions, and no cognition, how could he ever have any mental activity? The whole universe would then become the product of simple chance, and our life a cosmic coincidence.

In addition, to believe that the universe, the planets, and everything in them would be simply the product of "natural laws", means to also accept the false idea that God would have no direct power over our lives, because the natural principles of physics, chemistry, mathematics, biology, geology, and all other sciences would have been responsible for the creation and maintenance of the universe by themselves, without the assistance of an almighty being.

That is why the First Vision is so important for the world: at that occasion and in subsequent visions Joseph Smith saw that there is a God, a perfect, glorified, almighty man, with a body of flesh and bones—tangible², not just a symbolic image of a body—and with passions: a God who can hear and speak³, who can weep⁴, who can feel joy⁵.

The Knowledge of God

The first principle of the gospel is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ⁶. But the Prophet Joseph Smith taught that in order to have faith one needs to know who and how he is: "It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the Character of God, and to know that we may converse with him as one man converses with another, and that he was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did ..."⁷

In the scriptures and in the words of the latter-day prophets we find information about the existence of God, about his character, perfections, and attributes, his way of dealing with his children, and the order of his eternal kingdom. But that is not all:

"How do men obtain a knowledge of the glory of God, his perfections and attributes? ... Let us here observe, that after any portion of the human family are made acquainted with the important fact that there is a God [through the scriptures and through the testimonies of other individuals] ... the extent of their knowledge respecting his character and glory will depend upon their diligence and faithfulness in seeking after him ... By devoting themselves to his service, through prayer and supplication incessantly strengthening their faith in him ... until, like Enoch, the brother of Jared, and Moses, they shall obtain faith in God, and power with him to behold him face to face."⁸

But how can one acquire the third requirement, "the knowledge that the course of life which [one is] pursuing is according to [the Lord's] will"? The prophet Joseph addressed that saying:

"Let us here observe, that a religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation ... because ... it is through the medium of the sacrifice of all earthly things that men do actually know that they are doing the things that are well pleasing in the sight of God."⁹

So we see that we must learn about God, serve him, pray to him, and offer sacrifices of time, talents, means, and other possessions until we finally have strong enough a faith to behold his face. And this knowledge is not obtained simply by reading, but by practicing those things one has learned. This is the main

² D&C 130:22

³ D&C 6:22-23; 25:12; 88:2; 112:1

⁴ Moses 7:28

⁵ D&C 18:13

⁶ Fourth Article of Faith

⁷ TPJS, p. 345. April 7, 1844.

⁸ *ibid.*, p.32,23; brackets added.

⁹ *ibid.*, p.57

reason why we have classes in our organizations and quorums; so that we can share with others¹⁰ the knowledge that we have obtained through our personal study and experience. This is also the reason for assignments and activities in the Church—to practice these knowledge through small acts of service rendered to each other, which in turn are acts of service unto the Lord¹¹.

As church leaders we participate in this process of acquiring the knowledge of God both individually and in our assignments, by planning and helping administer classes and programs, ensuring the fulfillment of this objective--of knowing God¹². This objective is a lifelong pursuit, and we must never cease to seek it, so one day we may say like our father Abraham: "Thy servant has sought thee earnestly; now I have found thee¹³".

Notice that the words of the prophet Joseph Smith imply that the ultimate knowledge of God will come as a result of our personal encounter with Him. Such experience can only happen if we are pure and clean enough to deserve the application of His mercy, which will allow us, just like it happened with Moriancumer, Moses, and Enoch, to be "... redeemed from the fall ... [and] brought back into [His] presence¹⁴ ... [having] the glory of God ... upon [us] ... [so that we may] endure his presence¹⁵ ... [and being] clothed upon with glory ... [see] the Lord ... face to face¹⁶ ... and [have] faith no longer, [but know,] nothing doubting ... having this perfect knowledge of God¹⁷ ..."

The Doctrine of Christ

So far in our discussion we have dealt with the first knowledge members of Church of Christ must obtain: the knowledge of God, which will enable us to develop the faith we will use to perform the work of the Lord--i.e., "to bring to pass immortality and eternal life¹⁸" to ourselves and others.

Having done that, the next step is to learn the doctrine of Christ, and the Savior himself explained what that doctrine is:

"And this is my doctrine, and it is the doctrine which the Father hath given unto me ... and I bear record that the Father commandeth all men, everywhere, to repent and believe in me. And whoso believeth in me, and is baptized, the same shall be saved; and they are they who shall inherit the kingdom of God. And whoso believeth not in me, and is not baptized, shall be damned. Verily, verily, I say unto you, that this is my doctrine, and I bear record of it from the Father; and whoso believeth in me believeth in the Father also; and unto him will the Father bear record of me, for he will visit him with fire and with the Holy Ghost

¹⁰ D&C 88:118

¹¹ Mosiah 2:17; 5:13

¹² John 17:3; D&C 132:24

¹³ Abraham 2:12

¹⁴ Ether 3:13; brackets added

¹⁵ Moses 1:2; brackets added

¹⁶ Moses 7:3-4; brackets added

¹⁷ Ether 3:19-20; brackets added

¹⁸ Moses 1:39

... And again I say unto you, ye must repent, and become as a little child, and be baptized in my name, or ye can in nowise receive these things. And again I say unto you, ye must repent, and be baptized in my name, and become as a little child, or ye can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God. Verily, verily, I say unto you, that this is my doctrine, and whoso buildeth upon this buildeth upon my rock, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against them. And whoso shall declare more or less than this, and establish it for my doctrine, the same cometh of evil, and is not built upon my rock; but he buildeth upon a sandy foundation, and the gates of hell stand open to receive such when the floods come and the winds beat upon them.¹⁹"

One of the problems we may sometimes face in the Church is that the first principles of the Gospel, or the doctrine of Christ—faith, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Ghost—are set aside and replaced by other subordinate doctrines. We sometimes go about our lives believing that the central aspects of the gospel is temple attendance or home or visiting teaching, or meetings, or whatever else. We should consider that none of these things would exist, nor would they benefit us in any way in eternity, without the atonement. This idea, together with the remembrance of the doctrine of Christ, or the first principles of the gospel, must remain constant in our minds.

Faith and repentance are not topics reserved only for investigators and less active members. Those who may consider themselves "strong and firm," who have served full-time missions and received the temple ordinances also need to develop faith and exercise repentance. Some of us at times view ourselves in some sort of "higher level" of membership, where these "elementary" doctrines would no longer be pertinent. That is a mistake. I have seen or heard of a few brothers and sisters, who once rendered service in positions of great responsibility, becoming less active members. I can only wonder how many of them got to that point of inactivity--and in some cases unbelief--as a result of not paying attention to those "elementary" doctrines.

The first principles of the gospel, or the doctrine of Christ, are for all of us, no matter our age (provided that we are more than eight years old) or our many years of membership. Even those among us who were born in LDS families and have been active members all their lives will still have reasons to repent. All need to have faith in the Lord and in the power of his atonement, to partake of the sacrament, and to receive the visitation of the Holy Ghost.

Without obedience to these basic principles, one may temporarily lose the blessings connected with the ordinances of the gospel until he or she repents²⁰. All blessings are predicated upon our individual righteousness, and righteousness presupposes continuous repentance. Without continuous repentance and the weekly renewal of baptismal covenants through the sacrament there is no visitation of the Holy Ghost; without the visitation of the Holy Ghost there will be no personal revelations. And how will we be able to receive power from on high and find our way back to the presence of the Lord without the knowledge of the meaning of our patriarchal blessings and the symbolic instructions of the endowment?

The efficacy of our ordinances, or their acceptance by the Lord, depends on our practice of the first principles of the gospel--mainly faith, repentance, and the gift of the Holy Ghost, with the weekly renewal of the baptismal covenants. When we visit others as visiting teachers or as home teachers we need to have purified ourselves (through the process of repentance), so that we may be in tune with the Spirit of the Lord. Only then the Lord will speak through us for the benefit of the person being visited; otherwise these visits will become mere worldly social gatherings and another cold number in our reports.

¹⁹ 3 Nephi 11:32-35,37-40

²⁰ D&C 130:20-21; 132:5

Likewise, without genuine repentance and without faith in God and in the power of his atonement, a sacrament meeting is just one more meeting that we attend, without any effects: no renewal of our covenants, no strengthening of our spirits, nothing--just one more meeting.

So we see that in our service as church leaders we must encourage those under our responsibility to perform all things required from them without losing sight of the relationship between these important activities and the doctrine of Christ. The words of the Prophet Joseph Smith are a summary of this concept:

"The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it. But in connection with these, we believe in the gift of the Holy Ghost, the power of faith, the enjoyment of the spiritual gifts according to the will of God, the restoration of the house of Israel, and the final triumph of truth.²¹"

The Things Pertaining to the Kingdom

Now that we have understood the true doctrine of Christ, and how it subordinates all other principles, laws, and doctrines, what else should we learn? The Lord himself answered that, and I will dare to provide a few possible meanings:

"Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand²²"

At this point of this passage, a good question to be asked is what would be these things that pertain to the kingdom of God?

"... things both in heaven [astronomy] and in the earth [geography, zoology], and under the earth [geology]; things which have been [history], things which are [social sciences], things which must shortly come to pass [prophecies]; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations [political science, economics, international relations], and the judgments which are on the land [current events]; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms [geography, anthropology]--That ye may be prepared in all things when I shall send you again to magnify the calling whereunto I have called you, and the mission with which I have commissioned you. Behold, I sent you out to testify and warn the people, and it becometh every man who hath been warned to warn his neighbor.²³"

There is an immense amount of knowledge to be learned. There is an eternity of knowledge before us, plenty of subjects to be discovered or rediscovered. And yet, once in a while we find individuals who say that they already know enough, or others that say that they can no longer learn; and yet others who don't want to learn, and who try to justify themselves by saying that since in the spirit world they will be able to learn what they need they don't have to worry about it now. For these, we may suggest the following responses:

²¹ TPJS, p.121. May 8, 1838.

²² D&C 88:78

²³ D&C 88:79-81; brackets added.

"Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection. And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come.²⁴"

"I shall not cease learning while I live, nor when I arrive in the spirit world; but shall there learn with greater facility; and when I again receive my body, I shall learn a thousand times more in a thousand times less time; and then I do not mean to cease learning, but shall still continue my researches.²⁵"

"And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written ...²⁶"

The Learning Process

The next question is: how do we learn the doctrine of Christ? Instead of trying to suggest a magic formula to help in our learning (we all have at least one), I just want to focus on what attitude we must have to learn. The appropriate attitude is described by two keywords:

"... treasure up in your minds continually the words of life ...²⁷"

"... feast upon the words of Christ; for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do.²⁸"

I like these two keywords: treasure and feast. In the first analogy, based on our knowledge in the fields of Finance, Accounting and Economics, we are reminded of the operations involved in maintaining a treasure: that it must be guarded and accounted for continually; that it must also be wisely invested, so that it won't lose its value in the face of inflation²⁹. Likewise, our knowledge of the doctrine, the law and the principles of the kingdom of God, must be continually assessed; and if we do not use them, we may lose them³⁰.

In the second analogy, we learn that the words of Christ must be taken in great portions, just like the food in a feast (or banquet). President Spencer W. Kimball warned us against the risk of having only small doses of scriptural knowledge:

"We overestimate our scriptural knowledge. I ask us all to honestly evaluate our performance in scripture study. It is a common thing to have a few passages of scripture at our disposal, floating in our minds, as it were, and thus to have the illusion that we know a great deal about the gospel. In this sense, having a little knowledge can be a problem indeed. I am convinced that

²⁴ D&C 130:18-19

²⁵ Discourses of Brigham Young, p.248. March 4, 1860.

²⁶ John 21:25

²⁷ D&C 84:85

²⁸ 2 Nephi 32:3

²⁹ Those who have ever lived in a highly inflationed economy know that the rule is "use it, or lose it."

³⁰ Alma 12:9-11

each of us, at some time in our lives, must discover the scriptures for ourselves--and not just discover them once, but rediscover them again and again.³¹"

As we grow in knowledge and gain further insight, we will find additional meanings to even well-known passages of scripture. Through the guidance of the Holy Ghost³² we may discern which of those additional meanings are correct, for our personal benefit. I believe this can also happen if we try to study the scriptures in depth in a foreign language.

Above all, we should keep in mind these words of the Prophet Joseph Smith: "Could you gaze into heaven five minutes, you would know more than you would by reading all that ever was written on the subject."³³"

³¹ Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, p.134. September 1976.

³² Moroni 10:4-5; D&C 9:8-9

³³ TPJS, p. 324. October 9, 1843.

About the Author



Marcus Helvécio Tourinho de Assis Martins is a native of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in July, 1972. In August of 1978 he became the first black member to serve as a full-time missionary for the Church in the 20th century, serving in the Brazil São Paulo North Mission.

Since then, brother Martins served as bishop, counselor in branch presidencies, member of stake high councils, stake and ward executive secretary, high priests group leader, ward mission leader, temple officiator, stake and ward sunday school president, and teacher in primary, sunday school, and institute of religion. In the early 1980's he also translated the “Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ” into Portuguese.

Brother Martins has worked over the years as a systems analyst and independent consultant for the Brazilian government and a number of private corporations. He holds a Ph.D. in Sociology of Religion, Race and Ethnic Relations, a Master's degree in Organizational Behavior, and a bachelor's in Business Management. He taught religion and sociology classes at Brigham Young University, Ricks College, and currently serves as chair of the department of religious education at Brigham Young University-Hawaii.

He and Sister Mirian Barbosa Martins, herself a native of Petrópolis, Brazil, and a returned missionary with several years of leadership experience, have four children: Flávio, Natália, Felipe, and Cristina.