
Chapter 17: Restoration and the LDS Church

Gospel Principles A Scripture Study Guide

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"We believe the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a restoration of the original Church established by Jesus Christ."—James E. Faust, "The Restoration of All Things," *Ensign* (conference report), April 2006, 61.

The LDS Church's claim to be the restoration of the original, only true church on the earth is obviously foundational to its very existence. If it is indeed such a restoration, then all believers in Christ ought to unite with the LDS Church. On the other hand, if it is not the restoration it claims to be, then its very reason for existence falls to the wayside.

This study addresses the LDS claims of restoration from two perspectives:

- A. There are historical and biblical problems with the LDS Church's explanation for why a restoration was needed and with its claim to have restored the authority, organization, and offices of the early church.
- B. The alleged "important truths" that the LDS Church claims have been restored are not consistent with the teaching of the Bible.

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A. Claims of a Restored Church

1. The church of Jesus Christ was *not* taken from the earth.

The LDS concept of the Restoration presupposes its claim that the true church had disappeared from the earth for some seventeen centuries—what it calls the Great Apostasy. In our response to chapter 16 of *Gospel Principles*, we saw that the LDS doctrine of the Great Apostasy conflicts with the teaching of the Bible. We will not repeat that information here, but the point is extremely important. If the Great Apostasy is a myth, as the Bible's teaching indicates, then the Restoration is also a myth.

Chapter 17 of *Gospel Principles* appeals to the Old Testament book of Amos to support the idea of the Great Apostasy (95). Amos speaks of "a famine in the land...of hearing the words of the Lord"; people would "seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it" (Amos 8:11-12). However, in context Amos was referring to a lack of any comforting word for the northern kingdom of Israel (Amos 8:2-14) in the face of its impending conquest by the Assyrians, which took place some forty years later in 722 BC. In short, Amos's warning was about the military conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BC, not about an alleged Great Apostasy of the Christian church a millennium later.

2. The LDS concept of restoration was largely unoriginal, so that revelation is not needed to explain it.

The idea that the true church had disappeared from the earth and needed to be "restored" did not originate with Jesus Christ supposedly revealing this idea to Joseph Smith. The notion of a generalized apostasy requiring a divine restoration was widespread in Joseph's day and was especially popular in the still-young United States. *Gospel Principles* alludes to this fact when it says that some people had already come to the viewpoint "that the Church that Christ organized did not exist on the earth" (96). This is quite true, but what needs to be understood is that this places Joseph Smith's religion firmly in the context of the "restorationism" of his day. Many Americans in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries saw the new nation of America as offering a fresh start to return to the forms, experiences, doctrines, or practices of the "primitive church" unencumbered by the old established denominations of Europe. Various other religious groups before and after Joseph Smith claimed to represent the "restoration" of true Christianity to the earth. Some of the other groups that either originated or flourished in early nineteenth-century America included the Stone-Campbell "Restoration" movement, the Shakers (whose origins went back earlier and in England), and the Christadelphians.

In Joseph Smith's earliest account of his "first vision," we actually have testimony that confirms that Joseph had already arrived at a belief in the need for a restoration of the true church *before* he had received any divine revelation. He wrote in 1832: "...by searching the Scriptures I found that mankind did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatized from the true and living faith, and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament" (spelling and punctuation modernized). Note that he says he had come to this conclusion by studying the New Testament. As he grew up, Joseph would have heard this idea defended by various people who claimed to find support for it in the Bible. So this element of Joseph Smith's teaching can be explained quite simply as a reflection of the religious environment in which he lived.

3. We have good reasons, both historical and biblical, to question Joseph Smith's alleged "first vision."

The LDS scripture entitled *Joseph Smith—History*, part of Pearl of Great Price, includes an account of what Mormons came to refer to as the First Vision. According to this account, in the spring of 1820 Joseph went into the woods near his home to ask God which church to join. God the Father and Jesus Christ both appeared to Joseph, and Christ told him to join none of the churches, "for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight" (JS—H 1:19). Mormons commonly regard this event as the cornerstone event of the Restoration, "one of the most important events in the history of the world.... Beginning with this event, there was again direct revelation from the heavens" (*Gospel Principles*, 96).

A thicket of problems surrounds this alleged event, both historical (questions about whether it is a fact) and biblical (questions about whether it agrees with the Bible's teaching). Although Joseph gave accounts on several if not many occasions about the origins of his calling as the prophet of the Restoration, there is no solid evidence that he ever spoke about the First Vision to anyone prior to his handwritten account in the second half of 1832. That account was written more than two years after he founded the LDS Church and more than twelve years after the event supposedly took place. This isn't for lack of preserved communications from Joseph prior to the 1832 account. By the middle of that year, he had already delivered **83** of the revelations that are published in Doctrine & Covenants. Numerous other documents from Joseph and his associates from the late 1820s and early 1830s fail to mention the event. Nor does anyone seem to have known about it for at least a couple of years after the 1832 account, which was not published and indeed was lost and unknown until the 1960s. Joseph's accounts of the origins of his work routinely began, not with an appearance of Christ or of Christ and the Father in 1820, but with an appearance of an angel named Moroni in 1823 to tell Joseph about the Book of Mormon.

The 1832 First Vision account, written in Joseph Smith's own hand, contradicts the official account written in 1838 or 1839 and quoted above. Whereas the official account states that Joseph was praying to know which church to join and was told they were all wrong, the 1832 account states, as mentioned above, that Joseph had *already* reached the conclusion that all of the churches were wrong before his vision. The 1832 account also has a puzzling omission: it says nothing about God the Father appearing to Joseph. It is common for LDS prophets and apostles to cite the Father's alleged appearance to Joseph as one of the key elements of the story, because it supposedly revealed to Joseph that the Father and the Son were two separate Beings (contrary to the traditional Christian doctrine of the Trinity). Of course, people can give differing accounts and can't be expected to include the same details in each telling, but that truism doesn't address the problem here. If Joseph really saw God the Father, it is difficult to explain why he wouldn't mention this in his 1832 account. After all, he is, well, *God!* That would be much, much stranger than if I were to tell you that the Vice-President of the United States spoke to me, and then, several years later, add that, oh yes, the President was also there and spoke to me!

There are other historical issues which we address in several articles (see our [First Vision page](#)), but let me move on to the biblical difficulties. Two stand out:

- A vision in which Joseph supposedly saw, literally, both the Father and the Son in visible form is not consistent with the Bible's teaching that Jesus Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). God is by nature invisible to human eyes, but by becoming a man Jesus Christ took on a visible form that allowed us to see God in him (John 1:18).
- The claim that Jesus told Joseph that all of the churches were so wrong that he should not join any of them contradicts Jesus' teaching in the New Testament that the true church would never die (Matthew 16:18; see my response to chapter 16 of *Gospel Principles*).

The First Vision story essentially forces a choice. One can believe what the New Testament says about the nature of God and the future of the church, or one can believe what Joseph Smith says. Since Joseph's own accounts are inconsistent with one another, and since the story is based solely on his own testimony (since no one else was there), we ought to prefer the teaching of the New Testament over the highly questionable claims of Joseph Smith.

4. The claimed "restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods" was not necessary and never happened.

Once again, we have both historical and biblical reasons to question the LDS Church's claims that heavenly beings came to earth

to restore the priesthoods. The LDS Church claims that in 1829 John the Baptist conferred the Aaronic priesthood on Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, and that later that same year the apostles Peter, James, and John conferred the Melchizedek priesthood on them (*Gospel Principles*, 97). The earliest “revelation” informing the people about this is D&C 27:5-13, a three-hundred word text added in 1835 to what was Book of Commandments 28 by being literally spliced into the middle of a sentence. That earlier work, published in 1833, contains no mention of these ordinations. This evidence supports the conclusion that unfortunately it appears Joseph Smith made up the story sometime after 1833 to buttress his religious authority.

In any case, we can be sure that John the Baptist and those three apostles did not confer such priesthoods on anyone in 1829, because the Bible’s teaching clearly does not allow for such an occurrence. According to Hebrews 5-8, the Aaronic priesthood was part of the old covenant enacted through Moses that had become obsolete as a result of the coming of Christ. In addition, Jesus alone holds the priesthood “after the order of Melchizedek.” Hebrews uses this expression to mean that Melchizedek was a type or prophetic foreshadowing of the eternal high priesthood of Jesus Christ (see our [response to chapter 14](#) of *Gospel Principles* for more on these points). John the Baptist could not have conferred a priesthood that had been obsolete for nineteen centuries, and Jesus was certainly not going to confer his own authority as our heavenly high priest on Joseph or Oliver or anyone else!

5. The organization of the LDS Church is not in any sense a “restoration” of the organization or offices of the New Testament church.

As discussed at some length in our response to chapter 16 of *Gospel Principles*, the LDS Church’s claim to represent a restoration of the organization of the first-century Christian church is doubly flawed. The first problem with this claim is that the early church did not have an “organization” in the sense of a single institutional organization that ran the entire Christian movement. The hierarchical, top-down bureaucratic organization of the LDS Church is totally unlike the early church movement. The second problem is that the offices of the LDS Church hierarchy bear little or no resemblance to ministry positions in the early church. The first-century Christian movement had no offices of patriarchs, seventies, stake presidents, high priests, or priests, and teachers and deacons were something much different in the New Testament churches than they are in the LDS Church. The LDS Church’s claim that it “was organized with the same offices as were in the ancient Church” (*Gospel Principles*, 97) is simply false.

B. Claims of Restored Truths

Chapter 17 of *Gospel Principles* lists a number of “important truths” that it claims the Lord restored through the LDS Church. We have already discussed some of these doctrines in previous installments of this series, and others will be addressed in later installments. However, it will be useful to address the list briefly here.

It is crucial that we understand accurately what is meant by the claim that these truths have been restored. *Gospel Principles* states, “The Church today teaches the same principles and performs the same ordinances as were performed in the days of Jesus” (98). The claim is that those principles and ordinances were lost or corrupted between “the days of Jesus” and the days of Joseph Smith, when they were restored in their pristine purity and fullness: “These precious truths were returned in their fulness when the Church was restored” (99).

The only way to test this claim is to examine what principles and ordinances Jesus and the apostles taught in the first century and compare those with the principles and ordinances of the LDS Church. If the LDS claim is true, there should be a reasonably good match. Since our only reliable source of information about what Jesus and the apostles taught is the New Testament, that is where we will need to turn for the basis of our comparison.

It should be noted, as *Gospel Principles* indirectly acknowledges, that the LDS Church does not derive these “restored” doctrines from the Bible, but claims they are revealed in the Book of Mormon, Doctrine & Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price (99). We examine the relationship of these LDS scriptures to the Bible in our [response to chapter 10](#) of *Gospel Principles*. Again, our only reliable source of information about what the first-century church taught and did is the body of writings that they left behind for us in the New Testament.

1. The “first principles and ordinances of the gospel” in LDS teaching are not restorations of lost truths.

The fourth Article of Faith of the LDS Church states, “We believe that the first principles and ordinances of the Gospel are: first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, Repentance; third, Baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; fourth, Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost.” Mormons sometimes quote this statement to emphasize how much they have in common with traditional Christians, who of course also affirm the importance of faith in Christ, repentance, baptism, and the Holy Spirit.

However, the issue here is whether the LDS understanding of these “first principles and ordinances” is a restoration of lost truths that Jesus and the apostles had taught.

In the next four installments of this series, responding to chapters 18-21 of *Gospel Principles*, we will explain specifically where LDS teaching about faith, repentance, baptism, and the Holy Spirit differs from the teaching of the New Testament. Thus, I will merely summarize here what those later installments will explain in detail.

Broadly speaking, there are two major differences between the LDS and New Testament teachings about faith, repentance, baptism, and the Holy Spirit. The first is that in LDS teaching faith and repentance are understood as aspects of human obedience to the commandments of Jesus Christ. In New Testament teaching, faith and repentance are expressions of spiritual helplessness and utter dependence on Jesus Christ alone to save us. Some Mormons may dispute this way of describing the difference concerning faith and repentance, so in our responses to chapters 18 and 19 we will be giving clear documentation from *Gospel Principles* and other sources on this point. Second, in LDS teaching baptism and “the gift of the Holy Ghost” are ordinances that are validly performed only by authorized members of the LDS Church holding its “priesthood.” In the New Testament, no priestly authority or organizational validation is needed to perform baptism or to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Holy Spirit is not restricted to select human beings or special offices but is given freely to all who received the free gift of forgiveness and salvation in Christ (Acts 2:38; 10:44-48; 1 Corinthians 12:13).

2. God is a real being, but the Father does not have a body of flesh and bones.

After the “first principles and ordinances of the gospel,” *Gospel Principles* lists eight “other important truths” that it says the Lord restored in modern times. The first of these is that “Our Heavenly Father is a real being with a tangible, perfected body of flesh and bones, and so is Jesus Christ. The Holy Ghost is a personage of spirit” (99). The focus here is on the idea that the Father has a physical body, contrary to the teaching of historic Christianity. Notice that *Gospel Principles* presents this idea in a way prejudicial to the traditional belief that the Father is a person of spirit, not flesh and bones, by saying that he “is a real being.” Stating it this way implies that the traditional belief denies that the Father is a real being.

Standing behind this odd statement is the common LDS criticism that orthodox Christianity believes in a deity that is not really personal. Orson Pratt, in a statement quoted approvingly by James E. Talmage, referred to those who hold to the orthodox view of God as “immaterialists” and asserted that “the immaterialist is a religious atheist” who believes in “an indivisible unextending nothing” (Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Press, 1968], 465). Talmage himself asserted that “to deny the materiality of God’s person is to deny God; for a thing without parts has no whole, and an immaterial body cannot exist” (48). The current LDS Church president, Thomas S. Monson, speaking as an apostle in 1966, made the same point in this way:

This loving God who introduced his crucified and resurrected Son was not a God lacking in body, parts, or passions—the God of a man-made philosophy. Rather, God our Father has ears with which to hear our prayers. He has eyes with which to see our actions. He has a mouth with which to speak to us. He has a heart with which to feel compassion and love. **He is real. He is living.** We are his children made in his image. We look like him and he looks like us. (*Conference Report*, April 1966, 63, emphasis added)

The fact is that the God of orthodox Christianity, which is the God of the Bible, is quite real. God the Father does not need a physical body in order to be a real person. Indeed, it is a god that depends on physical eyes, ears, and mouth to see, hear, and speak that is an imaginary deity. (Jesus has a physical body, but he was God *before* he took human nature and is even now not *limited* to what his body can see, hear, or speak.) For example, physical eyes depend on light traversing the space between the object to be seen and the eyes in order for a physical being to see that object. If this is necessary to God’s ability to see, then his ability is limited by his physical location at any given time. If his ability to see is not limited by what his eyes can see (as Mormons may concede), then he does not really need eyes (or ears, mouth, etc.) in order to be a real being that can see (hear, speak, etc.). In any case, the God of the Bible has no such limitations. He sees all and hears all because he is omnipresent Spirit, fully and immediately present at all places and all times, so that nothing is ever hidden from his sight or hearing (Psalm 139:1-12; John 4:20-24; Acts 17:27-28; Hebrews 4:13).

3. We did not exist in a premortal life as spirit children of God.

The Bible does not teach a preexistence of the spirits of human beings. It never even discusses the idea directly, apparently because it simply wasn’t a live doctrinal issue for the authors and original readers of the Bible. What the Bible does say indicates rather clearly that our existence begins with our physical lives. Genesis teaches that God *made*—not sired or procreated—human beings in his image, that is, as his physical representatives on the earth, and that the first human came into being when God formed him from the dust of the ground and breathed life into him (Genesis 1:26-27; 2:7). Not all human beings are God’s “children,” but only those believers whom he *adopts* as his children and causes to be “born” spiritually (John 1:12-13; Romans 8:14-17; Galatians 3:27-4:7; 1 John 3:1-10; 5:1-2). Jesus Christ is the only human being who existed before his human life—and

he existed as God, not as one of God's billions of spirit offspring (John 1:1-3, 14; 3:31; 8:58; 13:3; 16:28; 17:5).

We discuss this matter in more detail in our [response to chapter 2](#) of *Gospel Principles*. That response includes comments on the few biblical texts that Mormons typically cite in support of the preexistence of human spirits.

4. There is no such thing as a Christian priesthood order that is needed for the administration of Christian ordinances.

As explained in our responses to [chapter 13](#) and [chapter 14](#) of *Gospel Principles*, the LDS priesthood system is at odds with the teaching of the New Testament, especially the book of Hebrews. The Aaronic priesthood is obsolete due to the coming of Christ whose own death was the final, ultimate sacrifice for sins. There is no such thing as a literal Melchizedek priesthood order passed down from one generation of priests to another; rather, Melchizedek was a priest who foreshadowed or typified the eternal, heavenly priesthood of Jesus (Psalm 110:4; Hebrews 5-7). The LDS priesthoods are not genuine restorations, because the Aaronic priesthood cannot be restored since it is obsolete, and the "Melchizedek priesthood" was never lost because Jesus, who is the one and only high priest of this type, holds it forever.

5. The truth that each person will be punished for his or her own sins was never lost.

The Bible clearly states several times that human beings will be judged according to their works (Psalm 62:12; Proverbs 24:12; Matthew 16:27; Romans 2:6; Revelation 2:23; 20:13). The church never lost this basic truth. The LDS Church, however, claims that it has restored this idea.

The second Article of Faith states: "We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam's transgression." This statement is probably best viewed as a half-truth. Human beings will certainly be judged and punished for their own sins. However, there is a sense in which the entire human race has already been punished for Adam's sin. As a result of Adam's sin in Eden, every human being is born as a mortal and exhibits, as he or she matures into a responsible adult, a capacity and even predisposition for sin. Even Mormons agree with historic Christianity that our mortality is a consequence of what Adam and Eve did in the Garden.

There is one particular interpretation of the Fall of Adam favored by some orthodox Christians that can be misunderstood as implying that we are not punished for our own sins. This interpretation holds that in some sense the entire human race was brought under guilt and condemnation because of Adam's sin. Something like this idea does seem to be present in Paul's statements about Adam in Romans 5:

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come. (Romans 5:12-14 ESV)

Death is a punishment for sin, and every human being receives this punishment. In this sense, at least, punishment comes on the entire human race because of Adam's sin. But neither Paul nor anyone else in the Bible teaches that God will condemn individuals to *eternal* punishment *merely* because they were descendants of Adam. Nor do any orthodox Christians hold to such an idea. Rather, God condemns to eternal punishment people who *ratify* Adam's sin by committing sins themselves. There are exceptions—for example, children who die in the womb or infancy suffer death as a consequence of Adam's sin, but this does not mean that God also condemns them to eternal punishment. In fact, Paul says later in Romans that children in the womb have not done anything good or bad (9:11). Since Paul teaches that our eternal judgment will be based on works (2:6-9), we must conclude that in Paul's view such children will not be condemned eternally because they have done no bad "works" on which to be judged. And this is the view of many if not most orthodox Christians today.

In any case, the vast majority of Bible-believing Christians throughout church history, including Joseph Smith's day and our own day, have agreed that human beings will be judged for their own works. Therefore, this doctrinal truth was never lost.

6. Children do not become accountable candidates for baptism when they turn eight years old.

The LDS Church teaches that children should be baptized at the age of eight (D&C 68:27). This practice assumes that children prior to that age are not accountable for what they do, but by that age and thereafter they are accountable (compare D&C 20:71). For example, LDS President Gordon B. Hinckley stated that "baptism is performed at the age of accountability, when people are old enough to know right from wrong" ("The Great Things which God Has Revealed," *Ensign* [conference report], May 2005, 82).

There is, of course, nothing in the Bible that specifies that children become accountable to God for any wrongdoing they commit once they turn eight years old. In fact, the Bible gives no specific “age of accountability.”

Mormons may suppose that this is one of those lost truths that somehow got dropped or excised from the Bible. However, a moment’s reflection will raise a troubling question for this claim. The hard fact is that children do not mature at the same rates. Anyone who has children knows that children go through growing “spurts” as well as “plateaus” and that they do so at different times. Thus, one child may learn to walk at eight months but another at twelve months. One child may learn to read at age three and another at age five. Likewise, children reach moral awareness at different ages; they become morally self-reflective at different points chronologically. This fact is especially noticeable in the case of children who are developmentally delayed (as is one of my own children).

Thus, the Bible wisely gives no precise information concerning an age when children become morally and spiritually accountable to God for their behavior, because there is no such age that applies to all or even most children. Nor does it specify an age at which children should be baptized. The Bible teaches that anyone who confesses his or her sins and publicly confesses faith in Jesus Christ according to the gospel is a proper candidate for baptism. By this standard, some four-year-old children are able to make a credible confession and are ready for baptism, whereas some eight-year-old children are not.

7. There are not three kingdoms of glory, but only one eternal state, the new heavens and new earth, for those who do not suffer eternal punishment.

The New Testament teaches consistently that all human beings face one of two eternal futures. It speaks of these two possible futures as destruction or life (Matthew 7:13-14), eternal punishment or eternal life (Matthew 25:46), perishing or having eternal life (John 3:16), a resurrection of life or a resurrection of condemnation (John 5:29), the domain of Satan and darkness or the kingdom of light and God’s Son (Acts 26:18; Colossians 1:13), and the lake of fire or the new heavens and new earth (Revelation 20:10-21:8).

There is no basis in the Bible for the idea of three heavenly kingdoms of glory. This idea is directly tied into the LDS understanding of salvation, according to which virtually everyone who will ever live on the earth will be saved to one of these three kingdoms of glory. The third and lowest of these kingdoms, the “telestial” kingdom, will supposedly be inhabited by people who reject the gospel of Jesus Christ not only in this mortal life but also in the afterlife when they are given a chance to accept it there.

We will be examining these ideas in detail in our response to chapter 46 of *Gospel Principles*. We also have a resource available now on “The LDS View of Heaven and Hell,” which is part 15 in our *Bottom-Line Guide to Mormonism* series. All of the parts to that series are available by mail for the asking by contacting us at the Institute for Religious Research.

8. The hope for family members to live forever is not found in LDS temple ordinances but in family members placing their faith solely in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The LDS Church claims that “family relationships can be eternal through the sealing power of the priesthood” (*Gospel Principles*, 99). This statement refers to specific religious rituals or ordinances that only faithful members of the LDS Church may receive in their temples. According to LDS doctrine, families cannot continue after death unless their members have undergone these rituals.

In biblical teaching, human families are temporal foretastes of our eternal “family” to which we can belong through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 3:14-15; Revelation 21:1-7). The memories and values of those earthly family relationships will not be erased, but they will be superseded by our perfected, glorified relationship with God as our Father, the relationship between Jesus Christ and the church as his “bride,” and our relationships with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. See the end of this article for some resources on this important topic.

9. Ordinances are not necessary for salvation and so are not needed for the salvation of those who died before those ordinances existed.

Gospel Principles states, “Ordinances and covenants are required for salvation and are available for both the living and the dead” (99). We should clarify that by “salvation” in this context is meant salvation to the highest of the three heavenly kingdoms, the celestial kingdom. The “ordinances and covenants” to which *Gospel Principles* refers include baptism, laying on of hands to receive the “gift of the Holy Ghost,” and the temple ordinances (in particular, an “endowment” rite thought to imbue the faithful with spiritual power, and marriage for eternity, which in turn is thought to be necessary for building families forever). Since all but a very tiny percentage of the billions of people who will ever live on the earth will receive these ordinances while they are alive,

the LDS Church engages in a massive work of trying to perform these rituals on behalf of the dead.

We will examine these matters in our responses to chapters 20, 21, and 40 of *Gospel Principles*, and so we will only offer some brief comments here.

The New Testament teaches nothing about any Christian ordinances to be performed in temples, and says nothing about endowment rituals or marriages for eternity. The true “gospel principle” of relevance here is the New Testament’s teaching that Christ serves as our high priest in the heavenly temple, making the earthly temple and its rituals became obsolete (Hebrews 8). From another perspective, the New Testament speaks of the church itself, the people of God united in Christ, as the new “temple” in which God dwells (Ephesians 2:20-22; 1 Peter 2:4-8).

Of course, the New Testament does teach the ordinance of baptism as a rite of initiation into the Christian church, something Christ himself commanded (Matthew 28:19). As New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce put it, “the idea of an unbaptized believer does not seem to be entertained in the New Testament” (*The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], 70). However, the New Testament presents baptism as a sign or symbol of salvation, not as a prerequisite for salvation. We may see this distinction, for example, in the account of the salvation of Cornelius and his family, when the gift of the Holy Spirit came on them *before* they were baptized (Acts 10:44-48). The example of Cornelius’s household receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit in this way also proves that the gift does not require a rite of laying on of hands, since they received the Holy Spirit without any such rite. By contrast, in the LDS Church, one must first be baptized, and then someone with priesthood authority must lay hands on the person in order for them to receive “the gift of the Holy Ghost.”

Although baptism is not necessary for salvation, that issue is somewhat moot, since virtually all professing Christians are in fact baptized. Practically every Christian denomination requires baptism of anyone who wishes to be recognized as part of the church. The real issue is whether we should accept the claim that no Christian outside the LDS Church has been validly baptized. Since this claim rests on the LDS doctrine of priesthood authority, which is clearly unbiblical (see point #4 above), we should reject the claim that only baptisms performed in the LDS Church are valid.

Finally, the New Testament does not support the practice of performing rituals for the dead. Paul’s one passing reference to baptism for the dead (1 Corinthians 15:29) does not endorse the practice, but merely mentions that those who engage in this practice are being inconsistent with their denial of the resurrection of the dead. If the LDS teaching on this subject were correct, it would mean that virtually all of humanity will make their decision in the spirit world, not in this mortal life, whether to accept the gospel and baptism performed on their behalf. It is difficult if not impossible to reconcile this claim with the New Testament’s teaching that the time for coming to salvation is now (2 Corinthians 6:2) and that what comes after death is the judgment (Hebrews 9:27).

10. The LDS “restoration” places inordinate emphasis on rituals.

It is worth noting, as we look back on these alleged restorations of “precious” and “important” truths in the LDS faith, how many of them have to do with religious rituals. Two of the so-called “first principles and ordinances of the gospel” are rituals as practiced in the LDS Church (baptism and laying on of hands). Four of the additional eight restored doctrines listed in *Gospel Principles* focus on rituals (priesthood administration of ordinances, baptism of children at age eight, sealing ordinances for the family in the temple, and ordinances required for salvation).

This heavy emphasis on religious rituals is inconsistent with the New Testament. As explained briefly above, most of these rituals are not part of New Testament teaching and in fact are inconsistent with its teaching. Baptism is mentioned in only nine chapters of the twenty-two epistles of the New Testament, usually in passing. (1 Corinthians 1:13-17 is the notable exception, but there Paul is actually *deemphasizing* the importance of baptism.) When Paul makes the point that it no longer matters whether a man has been circumcised or not, he does not make this point by saying that what matters now is baptism or any other supposed Christian ordinance, but by saying that what matters is “faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6; see also 6:15). The gospel of Jesus Christ is not about a religious organization, priesthood administration, or religious rituals; it is about a faith relationship with God characterized by love for God and others. This true gospel does not need to be restored because it was never lost.

Questions for reflection:

- If the Bible does not predict a Great Apostasy, would it not make sense for Christians who trust the Bible as God’s Word to reject modern claims of a Restoration?
- How do you reconcile the evidence that even before his “first vision” Joseph Smith had already accepted the idea that true Christianity needed to be restored with the official account of that vision, in which Joseph’s prayer was for wisdom

to know which of the existing churches to join?

- *According to LDS doctrine, Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and the other early LDS leaders would have had no authority to found the church, baptize people, or do anything else in the church without their ordinations from John the Baptist and three of the first-century apostles. Is it not troubling, then, that they never said anything about these ordinations until more than four years after the LDS Church was founded?*
- *If the LDS Church teaches “restored” doctrines that were taught by the first-century apostles, is there any better way to verify this fact than by comparing those LDS doctrines with the New Testament?*
- *Is there any clear evidence to show that the first-century apostles taught that God the Father is an exalted man and that we are the spirit offspring of heavenly parents?*
- *Almost all Christians throughout church history have affirmed that each human being will be judged for his own sins. How then can the LDS Church claim this is a lost truth that has been restored?*
- *Considering the fact that children mature morally and spiritually at different rates, isn’t the Bible right not to specify an age of accountability?*
- *How were the members of Cornelius’s household able to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit before they were baptized, let alone before anyone laid hands on them?*
- *Is the LDS emphasis on the supposed restoration of various ordinances consistent with the New Testament?*

For further study:

First Vision. IRR’s collection of resources addressing the claim that Joseph Smith saw God the Father and Jesus Christ in the spring of 1820.

LDS Doctrine and the Bible. IRR’s collection of articles comparing the teachings of the LDS Church with the teachings of the Bible.