University of Utah Stakes Devotional, January 24, 2010 Elder Bruce C. Hafen

Only a few days ago, I received a phone call--a cry for help, really—from a good friend in another country. He told me that another fine man whom I know and love in that country is questioning his faith because of his exposure to anti-Mormon literature he found on the Internet. I have received enough similar calls in recent years, as I suspect some of you have, that tonight I want to offer some perspectives on anti-Mormon writing in the Internet age.

Marie and I first met in a small, discussion-oriented religion class. The teacher was West Belnap, BYU's dean of religion, a man of great spiritual and intellectual integrity. For each class period, a student would identify a religious problem, do research on it, then lead a class discussion on it. Each student then wrote a short paper on resolving the issue.

The questions our class members discussed were not skeptical or critical ones. Rather, I would call them "faithful questions" – honest, substantial questions from people seeking to learn in faith. The first time I ever noticed Marie Kartchner from Bountiful was when she presented her question to our class: "How can I bring the influence of the Holy Ghost more into my life?" After class each day, a small group of us, including Marie, would just keep talking, out into the hallway and across the campus. Coming to know Marie in that way actually solved my biggest religious problem, when that friendship blossomed into our marriage. In the past several decades, that same lively gospel conversation has continued, and it always will.

Some of the questions raised in that religion class gave me my first exposure to anti-Mormon writing. Under Brother Belnap's wise guidance, we learned about some of the standard anti-Mormon attacks on the Church and on Joseph Smith. It was a blessing to learn about these issues in an atmosphere of faith, with the support of well-researched efforts by fellow students. It also helped that Brother Belnap approached our discussions with complete openness, honesty, and the benefit of his long experience and sound perspective.

In this digital age, such sharing can help Church members be well-informed when they hear some challenge that may be new to them. The Church is already responding to this need, as illustrated by the recent publication of such distinguished books as the *Joseph Smith Papers* and *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*.

In my student days at BYU, anti-Mormon writing was buried in obscure places. The people most likely to track it down were those who, like the students in our class, did research on a specific topic. The others who found it and used it were those who had some complaint against the Church, but their arguments seldom earned serious access to the public marketplace of ideas because so many of their claims had already been discredited by responsible scholarship.

The world has changed dramatically in the years since I took that class. One of the great benefits of the Internet—yet one of the curses of the Internet--is that it now gives everybody, regardless of age, preparation, background, or guidance, unfiltered access to every conceivable bit of information on every conceivable subject. Each of those bits or bytes, regardless of the reliability of its source, seems entitled to the same factual value. This lets the bloggers at the extremes of any spectrum appear to be as qualified to speak as if they were world-class authorities. After all, they are right there in the Google index, just like the real rocket scientists.

This total democracy of access offers some great advantages, especially in countries where governments have controlled the flow of information. But unfiltered access also invites grave dangers—as illustrated by the terrible risks of pornography. When anyone and everyone is free to post his own blog or website, readers may be totally unprepared to evaluate the reliability of what they are reading. They have no way to check a website's factual accuracy or the credibility and the agenda of its authors, and they seldom have a Brother Belnap to whom they can turn with their questions.

For example, in a recent conversation with someone who was struggling with an issue he had encountered on an anti-Mormon website, I asked if he had also read about the topic on such websites as FARMS or FAIR. He said, "Oh, I can't trust those people because they are already biased in favor of the Church." I replied, "Do you think the sponsors of those anti-Mormon websites aren't already biased *against* the Church?"

Another risk of unfiltered access is that readers have no way of knowing which critical claims have already been discredited. The "anti" website sponsors certainly aren't going to tell them. But in fact, increasingly sophisticated research by LDS scholars has now responded well to most previous attacks on the Book of Mormon and other longstanding targets of criticism. It would be highly ironic if the Internet is producing more casualties from anti-LDS criticism in this day when the Church's scholarly credibility has never been higher.

For instance, few Book of Mormon skeptics would still hold on to the discredited Spaulding manuscript theory or the Ethan Smith "View of the Hebrews" claim. One only has to compare "View of the Hebrews" with the Book of Mormon to understand Elder Neal A. Maxwell's memorable imagery. He said that Ethan Smith's work is not even in the same universe as the Book of Mormon. "The [first few] notes in 'Chopsticks' and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony are substantially the same—but what an enormous difference [in what] follows!"[1] And in the academic world, which for years essentially ignored the Book of Mormon, several highly respected scholars have recently begun to say that it is time for scholars to take the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith more seriously.[2]

A few years ago, two Evangelical scholars visited BYU for a conference related to the Dead Sea Scrolls, an international research project in which BYU played a major role. They later presented a paper to their Evangelical colleagues expressing their alarm that they had underestimated the strength of Mormon scholarship. They were surprised to have found so many LDS scholars with superb training in "historiography, biblical languages, theology, and philosophy." They concluded that there are indeed "legitimate Mormon scholars skilled in intellectual investigation, trained in ancient languages" who "are not an anti-intellectual group." Further, "Mormon scholars have answered most of the usual evangelical criticisms."

"[C]urrently," they continued, "there are no books from an evangelical perspective that responsibly interact with contemporary LDS scholarly writings. In [our] survey of twenty recent evangelical books criticizing Mormonism we found that *none* interact with this growing body of literature. Only a handful demonstrate any awareness of pertinent works. Many of the authors promote criticisms that have long been refuted." Continuing the quote, "A number of these books claim to be 'the definitive' book on the matter. That they make no attempt to interact with contemporary LDS scholarship is a stain upon the authors' integrity and causes one to wonder about their credibility." Then they conclude, "[A]t the academic level, the evangelicals are

losing the debate with the Mormons. We are losing the battle and do not know it. In recent years the sophistication of LDS [scholarship] has risen considerably while evangelical responses have not."[3]

LDS scholars have now shown that the Restoration's claims are at least reasonable and plausible, offsetting negative attacks that claim to be based on logical evidence. Neutralizing those attacks doesn't seek absolute proof of gospels truths. Academic methods never do lead to absolute conclusions about religion. By their nature, science and history are always subject to new evidence and new interpretations of old evidence. LDS scholarship thus has the more modest but crucial purpose of nourishing a climate in which voluntary belief is free to take root and grow. When the external evidence is not strong enough either to compel or to prohibit belief, then faith is free to grow until it produces its promised fruits.

One of the fruits of mature faith is the multitude of spiritual witnesses that confirm the gospel's truth to us—after studying it out in our minds. Our testimonies are based not only on reason and evidence, but also on those inward assurances from the Spirit, telling us that what we are reading or hearing or feeling is true. Then, over time, we add the dimension of experience to the dimensions of reason and spiritual feelings, until we have a stable, seasoned testimony. We need to remember and record the sources of our testimony, so that when some new question arises, the things we *do* know can give us both perspective and patience about the things we *don't* know.

Oliver Cowdrey once wanted a new spiritual witness, perhaps because he faced some new question. The Lord told him, "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: 22-23)

I thought of this verse when Elder Marlin Jensen told me of a recent conversation he had had with a man who was dealing with some anti-Mormon issues. The man said to Elder Jensen, "How can you keep your testimony when you read things like this?" Elder Jensen replied, "When I read things like that, it isn't that I keep my testimony; my testimony keeps me."

Elder Jensen's attitude echoes Nephi's insight when an angel asked him if he understood the condescension of God. Nephi said, "I know that [God] loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things." (1 Nephi 11:17) Nephi gives us two points here: I don't know everything, but I do know that God loves me. I'm glad Nephi so openly acknowledged that he didn't have all the answers--which reassures me that it is okay, even healthy, to have a few faithful questions. But Nephi was not in doubt about the most basic question—he could trust God because he knew God loved him, even while he waited for the answers to his other questions. Nephi did not forget or question those nights in the past when the Lord had spoken peace to his mind.

So when you come across some new gospel question, don't feel disturbed or betrayed because nobody told you before about the issue, whatever it is. You will always gain more from what you discover than from what you are simply told. And you already know the answer to the most important question--God loves you and you can trust him. Consider this insight, recently shared with us by a Church member from Europe, writing about a woman of great faith: "Her

faith was based on *trust*, not on *blessings*, and [she could] therefore withstand every trial." In other words, don't stake your faith on whether you think God is blessing you or giving you all the answers you expect or want. Just trust him, whether you see the blessings or not. Then, even if the blessings come only after what the Lord called "much tribulation" (D&C 58:4), the blessings will surely come—and the tribulation, whatever it is, will surely work for your good. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "all things work together for good to them who love God."

I turn now to this general perspective on approaching gospel questions: look at the *content* of the Restoration's central messages, and don't get lost in the sometimes unclear details in the footnotes.

A friend recently asked for help with some questions about the Book of Abraham. Before telling me his questions, which dealt primarily with translation issues, he warned me that these questions could shake my faith—as they had his. I was already aware of the questions, but I decided I could help him more if I took a fresh look at the Book of Abraham. Then, because of the way my new reading connected with some other doctrinal points I have pondered in recent years, I experienced a strong renewal of my gratitude for Joseph Smith and for the Restoration.

The Grand Teton mountains in Wyoming are among the world's most magnificent natural creations. At the foot of the mountains in Jackson Hole is a championship golf course. Imagine a golfer on that course who spends most of his time looking for lost golf balls in the rough—without really noticing those spectacular mountains. What I recently discovered about the Book of Abraham made me want to shout to my friend, "Don't lose your way looking down for lost golf ball in the weeds of the foothills—lift up your head and see the towering mountains of true doctrine the Lord gave us through Abraham and in all the other modern revelations.

Comparing those majestic mountains to lost golf balls calls to mind a line from T.S. Eliot, which describes too many modern men and women—and perhaps those who are overanxious about incomplete footnotes to the grand message of the Restoration: "Here were decent godless people. Their only monument the asphalt road. And a thousand lost golf balls." So in what follows, I want to talk about the mountains, not the lost golf balls. And don't just look at the mountain. Go climb it, as did Nephi, Moses, the Brother of Jared, and Joseph Smith. You just might find the Lord himself at the summit. Be like President Spencer W. Kimball, when he so unexpectedly became president of the Church. He quoted Caleb: "Give me this mountain."

If we say that Joseph Smith "translated" scriptures as if he were using a scholar's typical translation methods, we seriously undervalue his role as a seer. Joseph said he translated the Book of Mormon "through the medium of the Urim and Thummim" and "by the gift and power of God."[4] He never described exactly how he translated, but it was clearly a revelatory process. As the Encyclopedia of Mormonism states, "[I]t was principally divine inspiration rather than [Joseph's] knowledge of languages that produced the English text of the book of Abraham. His precise methodology remains unknown."[5] *But* this much Joseph did tell us: "Could you gaze into heaven five minutes, you would know more than you would by reading all that ever was written on the subject."[6]

Consider one illustration of how translation and revelation can work together. While working on his translation of the Bible, Joseph came across a verse that didn't make sense to him. Then while he "meditated upon these things," he said "the Lord touched the eyes of our

understanding and they were opened." Then he described what he saw—an astounding vision of the three degrees of glory, now called D&C Section 76, which completely altered the doctrine of traditional Christianity about salvation, heaven, and hell, restoring the true doctrine that makes salvation more universally available. And we judge the truth of that vision by its doctrinal content, not by applying scholarly methods to evaluate how Joseph received it. . How he received it really doesn't matter that much to us, partly because our finite perspective wouldn't fully comprehend the process anyway. What matters is the vision's content. After recording that vision, Joseph wrote that it was "a transcript from the records of the eternal world." A "transcript from the records of the eternal world?" What was he talking about?

Hugh Nibley and other LDS scholars of ancient languages have told us that the Book of Abraham was inspired by ancient papyri without necessarily being translated directly from it. The Book of Moses, a companion to the Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price, was prompted by Joseph's work on the Old Testament, but it came by revelation, not by direct translation. And the books of Abraham and Moses were only part of what Terryl Givens calls Joseph's "grand project—the intimated master blueprint," the "Ur-Text" (or "original" text) -- which "constitutes a major idea in its own right." As Joseph's biographer wrote, "unlike the scholarly translators, he went back beyond the existing texts to the minds of the prophets, and through them to the mind of God."[7] In other words, Joseph had heavenly access to the original sources from which all other scripture had come. Perhaps that's what he meant about gazing into heaven for five minutes, or receiving data directly from "the records of the eternal world." Joseph Smith was our window into the entire heavenly realm. Perhaps he saw the same sweeping visions the Lord showed Moses, Nephi, John the Revelator, and other prophets.

The Restoration did not just correct particular theological points or re-translate specific terms. Rather, in Brother Givens' words, it was a "complete reconceptualization of the scope and sweep of [the gospel itself. Joseph gave us] an array of remarkable, tantalizing texts with consistent themes, motifs, and patterns, that emerge in a whole series of entire worlds recovered from the past. Premortal realms, Councils in Heaven, Nephite and Jaredite civilizations, an Adamic gospel dispensation, Enoch's life and ministry, Mosaic epiphanies and weeping Gods. One searches for a vocabulary adequate to such endlessly proliferating layers of time and being, beckoning us to imagine a totality in which they all share."[8]

Sometimes we underestimate how revolutionary the Restoration was—from a purely doctrinal standpoint. Only when we sense how significantly Joseph's revelations departed from many of the main assumptions of traditional Christianity will we see the monumental size of his doctrinal mountains. Said another way, we must see how far the apostasy had departed from the plain and original teachings of Christ, which echo in the heart of every child—echoes of divine parents, of having wandered here from another sphere, of an inward yearning for home and peace in the arms of a personal God whose literal offspring we are. The doctrines of the apostasy were simply wrong on many of the big, personal issues about human existence -- God's identity, our own identity, the fall, the atonement, the eternal purpose of mortality, and our post-mortal possibilities. And it was Joseph's access to God himself and to the "ur-text," that transcript from the records of the eternal world, that restored all the keys of knowledge and human meaning.

Knowing this, we should not be surprised that other Christian churches sometimes don't know quite what to do with us. Some years ago I became acquainted with a senior official in the U.S. National Council of Churches who has a Ph.D. in Christian history. When I saw that she was a well-informed and supportive friend of our Church, I asked her why some Christian leaders do not regard us as Christians. I said all other Christians should be grateful for the Book of Mormon, because it is such a potent second witness for the divinity of Christ, countering the claims of Bible critics who dispute His divinity.

She knew that Christ is at the absolute center of our faith, the central figure of the Book of Mormon, the heart of our personal and theological lives. But, she said, your problem is not that you don't worship Christ. So you won't change any minds by simply proclaiming your belief in Christ more visibly and more audibly. She explained that roughly a century ago, some Christian leaders agreed that to be considered part of the family of Christian churches, a religious denomination would need to accept certain key doctrines shared by the traditional Christian faith groups. These doctrines include the three-in-one divine trinity, original sin, no scripture other than the Bible, accepting as valid the baptism of sister Christian denominations, and not proselyting among other Christians. After mentioning these criteria, she said, "Do you see your challenge now?" I responded that our doctrine is not a challenge; rather, our doctrine offers an enormous opportunity for Christianity to re-discover its own doctrinal roots. The real problem is not that the Restoration strayed so far from traditional Christianity; the real problem is that so much of Christianity had strayed so far from what Christ himself taught.

Our thirteen Articles of Faith are but the tips of some revolutionary doctrinal icebergs. Consider some implications of just the first three articles of faith. First, "we believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost." Moreover, as Joseph wrote in D&C 130, "When the Savior shall appear we shall see . . . that he is a man like ourselves." And "The Father [also] has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's," while the Holy Ghost is "a personage of Spirit" which allows him to dwell in us. (D&C 130:1, 22)

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland recently compared this true restored doctrine about the Godhead to the "mystery of the trinity" from the Nicean and Athanasian Creeds, formulated in the 4th century to resolve deep disputes over the nature of God. "These creeds . . . declared the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost to be . . . unknowable, without body, parts, or passions; separate persons, but . . . a single being. . . . one God who is incomprehensible." He continued, "We agree with our critics on at least that point—that such a formulation for divinity is truly incomprehensible. . . . [L]ittle wonder that a fourth-century monk cried out, 'Woe is me! They have taken my God away from me, … and I know not whom to adore or to address.' How *are* we to trust, love, worship, to say nothing of strive to be like, One who is incomprehensible and unknowable? "[9]

In 1820, when Joseph Smith walked out of what one little girl called "the sacred forest," he had found the personal God this monk had lost—not some esoteric abstraction, but a flesh-and-bone being who is the literal father of our spirits. Joseph discovered not only that God has a body, but of equal importance, that God has a heart—a heart that beat in tune with his own.[10] And how could Joseph be so confident in re-defining the very nature of God, a question that had vexed philosophers for ages? Because he *saw* the Father and the Son, with his own eyes. He talked with them as one man speaks to another. Talk about discovering higher knowledge by gazing into Heaven!

Next consider the nature and origin of man, issues that connect to our understanding of the Creation, the Fall, and the Atonement. The creeds of traditional Christianity teach the Ex Nihilo creation—the doctrine that God created the universe and the first man essentially from scratch; He did not assemble His creations from any preexisting matter. As one typical creed states, "God made all things of nothing, by the word of His power, in the space of six days."[11]

Then came the Fall, with all its negative consequences. As another traditional Christian creed states, Adam and Eve "by their disobedience lost their purity and happiness, and in consequence of their fall all men have become sinners, totally depraved, and as such are justly exposed to the wrath of God."[12]

Now consider the staggering contrast between these ideas and the teachings of the Restored Gospel, which speak not only to philosophers, but to the heart of every child: "I am a child of God, and He has sent me here." He is the literal Father of our Spirits. We carry his spiritual genetic imprint, only one generation removed from him. As the Apostle Paul said, "For we are also His offspring." (Acts 19:28)

As the Lord said in D&C 93, "Man was also in the beginning with God." (93:29) Or in Joseph's words, the "mind of man is as immortal as God himself."[13] And in that pre-mortal realm, Joseph continued, "God found himself in the midst of spirits and glory, and because he was greater, he saw proper to institute laws where the rest could have the privilege of advancing like himself."[14] God showed Abraham these spirits or intelligences, which "were organized before the world was." He explained to Abraham his plan to send his spirit children to the earth to gain experience that would help them grow to their spiritual maturity and, as in any organic maturation process, maturity means the child could become like the parent.

Knowing that we lived together before birth as God's spirit offspring explains many of mortality's great puzzles. As President Boyd K. Packer stated, "There is no way to make sense out of life without a knowledge of premortal life....Then things fit together and make sense. . . .No other Church knows and teaches this truth."[15] Premortality makes life after death far more believable, because life after death clearly implies that the soul is eternal, having neither a beginning nor an end.

Knowledge of our premortal life casts a flood of light on other common human experiences. Some of that light has long been recognized by writers and artists whose instincts told them that our souls must have lived somewhere else before coming here. Something, some kind of homesickness in the human heart, longs for love and belonging to others and to God—as part of the central meaning of our existence. The greatest human yearning is not just to be "free" but to be "home." Some in today's world see freedom purely in political terms, as if being free from oppression is our greatest hope. But without meaningful connections with other beings, simply being left alone still does not fully satisfy the soul.

The premortal existence explains how psychologist Carl Jung could identify a common collective consciousness or "group memory" shared by all of mankind. It gives meaning to the universal moral imperative or conscience that Immanuel Kant found somehow present in each human heart. Premortality also helps explain the sheer variety in our mortal circumstances, suggesting that what we did before birth influences what the Apotle Paul called "he times and bounds" of our mortal habitation. (See Acts 17:26)

Premortality also helps us see that God did not create the earth from nothing—rather, in Joseph's terms, God "organized" "chaotic matter," because the "pure principles of element . . . may be organized and reorganized but not destroyed." [16] How could Joseph have known that years later the world's leading scientists would state as the law of conservation of matter the principle that matter can ultimately be neither created nor destroyed?

Joseph said that God designed the earth as a place to teach his children. He is the master teacher, and we are all learners. This earth is not our home. We are away at school. And the laws of God, our schoolmaster, are therefore not simply "a set of forbidding commandments" from a wrathful God of vengeance. Rather, His laws are "instructions on how to reach heaven" from a loving Father, which makes those laws "helpful and informative rather than distancing."[17]

The Restoration carries a unique and warmly human spirit about the origin and meaning of our lives, focused on our personal identity, our relationship with our Father, and his desire to further our development. The distinctions between these doctrines and the vague abstractions of the Apostasy are not picky theological details. They are life-giving differences; utterly contrasting paradigms. And those differences grow in significance as our comparison keeps going. Look briefly with me at the nature of man, the fall, and the atonement.

The children of Adam and Eve were not born into mortality as totally depraved sinners who first sprang into existence through a physical birth that stained them with an evil nature inherited from Adam and Eve. Rather, they came trailing clouds of glory from their heavenly home, born "innocent" rather than evil. "We believe that men will be punished for their own sins and not for Adam's transgression." Through his Atonement, Christ unconditionally took upon himself the effects of Adam's original sin.

Nonetheless, God sent Adam and Eve's children into a world that subjected them to death and sin for the wise purpose described this way in the Book of Moses, "they taste the bitter, that they may know to prize the good." (Moses 6;55) Only after tasting some of mortality's bitter fruits is our agency meaningful. And agency is absolutely essential to personal growth. So we are "enticed" by both good and evil influences, allowing us to learn from our own experience. And Christ's atonement protects us while we learn from our experience, if we submit ourselves His teachings as our schoolmaster.

Compared with other Christian churches, only the restored gospel sees the Fall as a positive, even an absolutely essential, step in human progress. We don't see Eve as an inept weakling whose choice brought God's wrath upon Adam, herself, and all their posterity. We place her and Adam among humanity's greatest heroes, honoring their courage in making the leap of faith and taking the terrible risks inherent in their choice to eat the fruit of knowledge. Only the Restoration conveys the meaning of Lehi's teachings: "Adam fell that men might be [mortal], and men are [mortal] that they might have joy." (2 Nephi 2:25)

And only the Restoration explains why the oppositions and troubles of mortality are a schoolmaster, not a punishment. If Adam and Eve had not transgressed, they would have remained childless in a state of unschooled innocence in the garden of Eden. In Lehi's words, if they had not partaken of the forbidden fruit, "they would have had no children; wherefore they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy for they knew no misery." Oh, I get it – no children, no misery! But that's what Lehi said—and it's true. And without both children

and misery, they would also never have known real joy. Moreover, they would have done "no good, for they knew no sin." (2 Nephi 2:23)

This perspective teaches us that having difficult—even miserable—experiences in our lives doesn't mean there is something wrong with us – or with God. The really hard problems are story problems—designed by our divine tutor as the best way, often the only way, to teach us. As we discover when learning how to operate a computer or play a piano, or how to be truly patient and kind, some things can be learned only by practice.

The Lord told Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail, "All these things shall give thee experience." Putting this insight into a larger doctrinal perspective, Richard Bushman wrote, "Experience was an unusual word to answer the problem of evil. [But the word] suggested life was a passage. . . Experience instructed. Life was not just a place to shed one's sins but a place to deepen comprehension by descending below them all. . . . Humans grow from grace to grace like Christ. Growth into a fullness comes from suffering."[18]

As God's children deal with both sweet and bitter experience, they must make many choices among the enticings of good and evil forces. Those choices then combine with the influence of Satan or Christ until each person develops either a divine nature or an evil nature. The Book of Moses describes this process in a uniquely valuable passage on man's nature.

After Adam and Eve left the Garden, an angel taught about the plan of salvation and the atonement of Christ. Then they taught those doctrines to their children: "Adam and Eve blessed the name of God, and they made all things known unto their sons and their daughters. And Satan came among [their children] saying: I am also a son of God; and he commanded them, saying: Believe it not [meaning, don't believe what your parents have taught you]; and they believed it not, and they loved Satan more than God. And men began from that time forth to be carnal, sensual, and devilish." (Moses 5:13)

This verse verifies that the children of Adam and Eve were not "devilish" or evil at birth. They were born innocent. Then they had both bitter and sweet experiences, which made possible a fully informed choice between good and evil. Sadly, they then chose not only to believe Satan—they chose to "*love* Satan more than God." As a result of following Satan so fully, they became not only carnal, but "devilish;" meaning, if they stay on that path, evil by nature.

On the other hand, once their agency is informed, Adam and Eve's children could "yield to the enticings of the Holy Spirit," and "put off" the natural, carnal man, as King Benjamin said. This means repenting of the carnal things they have chosen, accepting the gospel, and becoming "a Saint through the atonement of Christ." (Mosiah 3:19) Just as the word "devilish" describes those who are developing an evil nature, King Benjamin tells us that those who follow Christ will ultimately develop a "saintly" nature. We will become like Him whom we follow.

This restored doctrine about human nature creates a truly distinctive context for the Restoration's unique view about Christ's Atonement and the grace the Atonement makes possible. Since about the Fourth Century A.D., Christian theology has taught that, because of the natural depravity caused by Adam's original sin, man has an inherently evil nature. And that evil nature is the primary cause of human sins—people sin because they can't help it. In both the Catholic and Protestant traditions, only the grace of Christ can overcome this inborn evil—and

overcoming such depravity is the main purpose of grace. The Catholics have emphasized the place of the Church sacraments or "works" in dispensing divine grace, while Protestants have typically believed that God bestows grace directly upon those whom He alone chooses.

The restored doctrine of the Atonement, by contrast, begins with the premise that we are born not evil but innocent of original sin. We then taste sin, mistakes, adversity and other forms of bitterness in the mortal experience. This process teaches us the difference between good and evil, helping us draw on our experience in order to grow. If we repent, the Lord extends His grace to pay for our sins.

Thus, because of the Atonement, we can learn from our experience without being condemned by our experience. In this way, the Atonement uses the oppositions of mortality to nourish the personal capacities we must develop in order to return to God's presence. The Atonement is not a doctrine that simply erases black marks; it is fundamentally a doctrine of human development. "We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel."

Thus Christ's grace interacts continually with our own striving, helping us to learn from our mistakes and then to develop our divine attributes until we are spiritually mature enough to return to our Father's presence. No other theology or philosophy understands and teaches these plain and precious truths with anything approaching this coherent fulness. But Joseph the Seer taught them, through the heavenly blueprint the Father gave him through modern revelation.

I have wondered if Joseph really understood how dramatically these ideas differed from the teachings of the other churches of his day—and our day. Joseph's biographer wrote that he didn't argue against those teachings, and he seldom referred to them. "He was only vaguely aware of overthrowing entrenched theological traditions... He made pronouncements on the authority of his own inspiration, heedless of current opinion" giving us the true "stories of eternity" that "pictured a world of infinite possibilities' for mankind.[19]

As I consider the major threads that run through the Restoration's rich doctrinal tapestry, I am stirred by how much the Lord simply wants us to know who we really are, who He really is, and how our relationship to Him gives hope and purpose to the everyday turmoil of mortality. This doctrine is about our identity, and our identity is all interwoven with His, for we are his offspring, away at school, learning and growing through opposition, experience, and divine assistance. Once we are really secure about who we are and whose we are, we can handle anything.

This sense of identity assures us that our Father will never manipulate us or toy with us. Of course we require patience and perspective as we await the answers to our faithful questions. That is part of the divine tutorial by which He teaches us and stretches us. But no turbulence, no disappointment, no question or uncertainty need ever cause us to question his love. "We love him because He first loved us."[20]

What did we ever do, to deserve the blessing of living in a universe governed by a God of love who fathered our spirits and who wants, above all else, for us to find true joy? He prepared a plan designed to produce that happiness, if we just cooperate with Him; and because we are co-eternal with Him, he can't force us to cooperate against our will. So He teaches and watches

over us every day of our lives. And He waits as a tender parent, for the day when we will come home to him—to go no more out.

Brigham Young described that day in these words: "He is the Father of our spirits; and if we could know, understand, and do His will, every soul would be prepared to return back into His presence. And when they get there, they would see that they had formerly lived there for ages, that they had previously been acquainted with every nook and corner, with the palaces, walks, and gardens; and they would embrace their Father, and He would embrace them and say, 'My son, my daughter, I have you again;' and the child would say, 'O my Father, my Father, I am here again' "[21]

Testimony . . .

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[1] A Disciple's Life, p. 508.
[2] Terryl Givens, By the Hand of Mormon, pp. 5-6.
3. Carl Mosser and Paul Owen, "Mormon Scholarship, Apologetics and Evangelical Neglect: Losing the Battle and Not Knowing It?" *Trinity Journal of Theology* 19NS (1998): 179-205.

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[5] H. Donl Peterson, "Translation and Publication of the Book of Abraham," E of M p. 134.
[6] TPJS 324.
[7] Rough Stone Rolling p. 133.
[8] Terryl Givens, "Joseph Smith: Prophecy, Process and Plentitude," The Worlds of Joseph Smith Symposium, Dec. 27, 2005, ms. pp. 13-14.
[9] Jeffrey R. Holland, Ensign, Nov. 2007.
[10] Terryl Givens, note 8.
[11] Westminster Creed, article 4.
[12] Salvation Army Creed, article 5.
[13] King Follet.
[14] King Follett
[15] Mine Errand from the Lord, p. ___.
[16] King Follett.
[17] Richard Bushman, Rough Stone Rolling, p. 202.
[18] Ibid at 381.
[19] Rough Stone Rolling, p. 458.
[20] 1 John 4:19
[21] Journal of Discourses 4:268