THEOLOGY

The traditional task of theology (from the Greek theos, god, and logos, study of) is to seek understanding of God's reality, to describe divine things rationally, and to elaborate the present meaning of past manifestations of God, whether theoretically, practically, descriptively, or critically. Since scriptures and specific revelations supply Latter-day Saints with authoritative answers to many of the traditional concerns of faith, members of the Church tend to devote little energy to theoretical, speculative, or systematic theology. For Latter-day Saints, faith is anchored in revelations that occurred in history (see HISTORY, SIGNIFICANCE OF). From the perspective of the restored gospel, what can be known about divine things must be revealed by God. Though rationally structured, coherent, and ordered, the content of Latter-day Saint faith is not the fruit of speculation, nor has it been deduced from premises or derived from philosophical or scientific inquiries into the nature of things.

The word "theology" and much of what it describes originated with Plato, Aristotle, and the Orphics. The word is not found in the Bible or other LDS scriptures. What is typically understood as theology within Christianity was introduced by Origen (A.D. 185–254) and developed by Augustine (A.D. 354–430). Latter-day Saints have little interest in theology in the sense of trying to discover divine things with the unaided resources of the human mind. Even when theology is seen as essentially descriptive or apologetic, it is not entirely at home in the LDS community.

Not having what has traditionally been understood as theology, Latter-day Saints instead have texts that describe theophanies and special revelations and contain inspired teachings, along with several accounts of God's establishing his covenant people, usually coupled with accounts of a dialectic of obedience and disobedience that followed such events. These accounts may be said to contain "theology," but not in the sense that their meaning is discovered by human ingenuity instead of disclosed through the proclaimed word and will of God.

The core of faith is not a confession to a creed but a personal witness that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ (see RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE; TESTIMONY). Events such as the Prophet Joseph Smith's FIRST VISION and belief in continuing contact between God and his prophets anchor Latter-day Saint beliefs, allowing those beliefs to be both clearly identified and adapted to changing circumstances. This leaves little room for systematic treatises intended to fix, order, and settle the understanding of the believers, though it does allow room for reason as a tool for attaining coherence and for working out implications in the revelations (see REASON AND REVELATION).

Nor is the Book of Mormon a theological treatise. Instead, it is a long and tragic history, filled with prophetic warnings about deviations from covenants with God. In this sacred text, the gospel of Jesus Christ—beginning with faith, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the HOLY GHOST—provides the foundation for all other beliefs. According to the plan of God, those who genuinely comply and endure to the end will eventually be saved in the kingdom of God. As both ground and substance of LDS faith, these points of doctrine are understood as realities, not as matters of conjecture. It is a mistake to see them (or what is built upon them “line by line” through additional divine revelation) as “theology,” as that term is generally understood among Christians. Since the texts setting forth the gospel or doctrine of Jesus Christ are rooted in events that Latter-day Saints believe actually happened, it is in exegetical and historical work that both the explication and the defense of the faith usually take place.

Latter-day Saints can scarcely be said to have much in the way of a dogmatic theology, though they sometimes informally borrow a Christian tendency to designate the whole of their beliefs and dogma by the label “theology.” Some of the early leaders, coming as they did from sectarian backgrounds, seem to have felt a need for something approaching an orderly and authoritative setting forth of their beliefs. What they produced were initially called theological lectures (see LECTURES ON FAITH), and they seem to have been modeled after formal treatises like those by Charles G. Finney (1792–1875) or Alexander Campbell (1788–1866). But the formal methodology of these seven lectures has not been much adopted by other LDS writers.

The early Latter-day Saints were fond of the word “theology,” and it turns up conspicuously in some of their writings. A well-known example is Parley P. Pratt's A Key to the Science of Theology (1855), in which he defined theology as "the science of communication, or of correspondence, between God, angels, spirits, and men, by means of visions, dreams, interpretations, conversations,
inspirations, or the spirit of prophecy and revelation.” For Pratt, theology embraced all principles and powers upon which the worlds are organized, sustained, reformed, and redeemed: “It is the science of all other sciences and useful arts” (pp. 1–2). Such books have filled a need for a seemingly orderly explication of what was believed to have been revealed through Joseph Smith and for an indication of how to apply those revelations “in the duties of life” (AF, p. 5). To some extent, such works approach systematic theology, in that they are concerned with identifying truth, its structure, correspondences, and unity. These volumes have dogmatic dimensions with respect to the attributes and roles of God, his government, the creation, redemption, eschatology, and the like. They are also concerned with scrutinizing moral aspects of human life, free actions, suffering, ignorance, and sin. But their authors do not approach these topics by the use of reason unaided by revelation, nor are they considered officially authoritative by Latter-day Saints.

The desire for definitive answers to a host of vexing and unsettled questions has been satisfied in the present era by books like Bruce R. McConkie’s *Mormon Doctrine*. This book did not derive from a philosophical culture, as did much of traditional Christian theology. It is more nearly an instance of what those outside of Mormon circles would label as dogmatic, rather than formal or systematic, theology. Such compendia have no official standing and represent the opinions of their authors. Their pronouncements, however, are popular among some in the Church.

Some LDS teachings have been set forth in a seemingly philosophical framework by Sterling M. McMurrin, who has attempted to show how classical philosophy and Christian theology might be accommodated to what he defines as the metaphysics inherent in LDS teachings. Still, he discounts divine revelation, does not take the LDS approach to epistemology seriously, and looks instead for signs of naturalism and humanism. Thus, his views are incomprehensible to many Latter-day Saints, since he diverts attention away from historical matters and the crucial prophetic claims upon which the Latter-day Saint faith rests.

Elements of McMurrin’s stance have been appropriated by a few historians interested in trying to show that there has been a radical reconstruction of Mormon theology in its first 150 years, and that it has shifted from a pessimistic orthodoxy to an optimistic liberalism and back again toward a pessimistic neo-orthodoxy. Such explicitly theological literature seems selective, if not contrived or forced, and it has had virtually no impact on the life of believers. Instead, the influential scholarly works among Latter-day Saints tend to be either strictly historical or exegetical, though these works also have no official standing.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


LOUIS C. MIDGLEY

**“THIS IS THE PLACE” MONUMENT**

This monument depicts a dramatic moment in western and Church history. Brigham Young entered the Great Salt Lake Valley on July 24, 1847, and said, according to Church tradition, “This is the right place.”

In 1915 a committee including George Albert Smith, an apostle, and Church historians B. H. Roberts and Andrew Jenson identified the approximate spot at the mouth of Emigration Canyon where Brigham Young might have first seen the Salt Lake Valley and made his famous pronouncement. They placed a small board as a marker there that July.

One year later, a larger wooden marker was erected with the inscription “This is the place.” In