TRIALS OF JOSEPH SMITH

See: Smith, Joseph: Legal Trials of Joseph Smith

TRUE AND LIVING CHURCH

"The only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth" is a phrase from a REVELATION given to the Prophet Joseph Smith (D&C 1:30) often used by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when they testify to the truthfulness of the restored gospel in testimony meetings, MISSIONARY presentations, or other settings. The phrase echoes Paul’s “the living and true God” (1 Thes. 1:9), which also occurs elsewhere in the scriptures.

Latter-day Saints speak of “the only true and living church” because of their belief that Jesus Christ and his apostles organized the Church during their ministry on the earth. This organization included prophets and apostles at its head, along with various other offices such as bishop, elder, seventy, and so on. The holders of these offices were given authority to preach the gospel, perform ORDINANCES, and govern the Church.

However, as Christ and his apostles had prophesied, the “true” Church they established was lost from the earth through APOSTASY (JS—M 1:7–9, 22; 2 Thes. 2:3). Therefore there was a need for a RESTORATION. Guided by angelic messengers and by revelation from God, Joseph Smith and his successors have reestablished Christ’s Church in these “latter days.” Members bear testimony that the Church is true because they believe it is the restored Church of Christ, with the same authority, teachings, organization, and spirit found in the Church that the Savior originally established.

The Church is a “living” church with “living” scripture, not only because it has been restored by a “living God” who continues to reveal his will to his living prophets and people to lead them to life eternal, but also because it is a growing, dynamic organization that plays an important role in the way of life of active members. The Church has a lay ministry; therefore its offices are filled by the general membership. Many young men and women begin early in life to serve in Church positions as teachers and leaders, and continue to serve throughout their lives. Being involved in a significant way in an organization that is directed by continuing revelation and is dramatically growing leads its members to speak of it as a true and living church.

To its members, as President Spencer W. KIMBALL has stated, the LDS Church “is not a church. [It] is The Church of Jesus Christ” (The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, ed. E. L. Kimball, p. 421, Salt Lake City, 1982).

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TRUTH

The LDS conception of truth does not fit any of the categories in which it has been discussed in the Western philosophical tradition. For Latter-day Saints, truth is found in living the type of life exemplified by JESUS CHRIST.

In the Western philosophical tradition, truth is the characteristic or quality of an idea or statement that justifies belief in it. What this characteristic might be has been the subject of long-standing philosophical debate; some have said it is the correspondence with reality that true statements possess; some, their “tie-in” or coherence with other statements; some, their consequences or practical usefulness. So devastating have been the attacks upon each of these theories that in recent times many philosophers have abandoned altogether the traditional assumption that a firm or absolute kind of truth is possible. These philosophers say that because our knowledge of the world is heavily conditioned by the peculiarities of the particular language in which it is expressed, it is an interpretation at best; we have no basis for claiming we can ever know “how things really are,” they argue, and therefore, whatever truth exists is relative to the speaker’s language, culture, and situation. Absolute truth, thought of as a property of ideas or statements, is a concept that has fallen on hard times.

Commonly it is supposed that for Latter-day Saints truth is absolute in a way that makes it vulnerable to the relativist’s arguments. But for Latter-day Saints, as their scriptures and everyday discourse reveal, truth is not primarily a matter of
the correctness of ideas or statements, and consequently their view is not to be found among the traditional alternatives or any combination of them. Though they do speak of the truth of statements, they most often use the word “truth” to signify an entire way of life—specifically, the way of life exemplified, prescribed, and guided by Jesus Christ.

This conception of truth preserves senses attached to the word from the earliest times of which we have record. For example, central to the original idea of being true was “steadfast . . . adherence to a commander or friend, to a principle or cause, . . . faithful, loyal, constant, trusty,” “honest, honourable, upright, virtuous, . . . free from deceit, sincere” (“True,” *Oxford English Dictionary*). And among the main original senses of “truth” was “truth”—a pledge or covenant of faithfulness made uprightly and without deceit (“Truth,” OED). It is in the spirit of these ancient etymologies that Latter-day Saints believe that to walk in truth is to keep one’s commitments to follow Christ’s way uprightly.

Because Christ perfectly embodies the virtue of being true and faithful (in his case, to the life his Father required of him), there is a crucial sense in which he himself is the truth. “I am the way,” he said, “the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). He “received a fulness of truth” (D&C 93:26). His cosmic influence, called “the light of Christ,” is also the light of truth, giving life to everything and enlightening human minds. By means of this light, he is “in all and through all things” (D&C 88:6), a permeating presence. Given this sense of the word “truth,” it is not odd, as it otherwise would appear, to say, as does a key doctrinal REVELATION, that “truth shineth” (D&C 88:6–13).

Latter-day Saint scriptures indicate that people can come to “know the truth of all things” by the power of the HOLY GHOST (Moro. 10:5). The relevant contexts suggest this means to enjoy that comprehension of things that comes to the person who receives the light of truth and walks obediently in it. “He that keepeth his commandments receiveth truth and light, until he is glorified in truth and knoweth all things” (D&C 93:28). To the BROTHER OF JARED, a Book of Mormon figure of extraordinary faith, the Lord showed “all the inhabitants of the earth . . . even unto the ends of the earth. For he had said unto him . . . that if he would believe in him that he could show unto him all things” (Ether 3:25–26). Other prophets have had similar experiences (Moses 1:8, 27–29; 7:21; Abr. 3:12).

A certain scriptural definition of “truth” is especially familiar to Latter-day Saints: “Truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come” (D&C 93:24). Taken out of context (as it often is), this definition sounds like a statement of the correspondence theory of truth; but in context it expresses the morally richer idea of the comprehensive vision of reality that comes to those who walk in truth faithfully.

Understood in this way, disobedience and unfaithfulness are rejections of the light of truth. Satan “was a liar from the beginning” (D&C 93:25) and seeks always to “turn . . . hearts away from the truth” (D&C 78:10), partly by enticing people to become liars and deceivers themselves (D&C 10:25). The reason “men [love] darkness rather than light” is “because their deeds [are] evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved” (John 3:19–20). It is not for being mistaken that people are damned, but for their resistance to the truth they could receive if they would.

For Latter-day Saints, salvation is a matter of growing in truth and particularly in KNOWLEDGE of the GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST. Joseph Smith taught that “a man is saved no faster than he gets knowledge” (HC 4:588) and that “it is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance” (D&C 131:6). In context these statements mean that one cannot be saved in ignorance of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Latter-day Saints who recognize that truth is not merely a property of language but is central to a life of obedience to the Savior do not interpret these passages to mean that the learned—the scholars and scientists—have a better chance of being saved. Gaining knowledge and becoming more godlike are two aspects of a single process, which helps explain the Latter-day Saint emphasis on EDUCATION and personal scriptural mastery as well as on righteous living.

The prophets of the present dispensation, from Joseph Smith onward, have championed the idea that the Latter-day Saints have no exclusive access to truth. God enlightens people everywhere, and therefore, as Presidents of the Church have all insisted, insofar as other peoples have any principle of truth (and they do), “whether moral, religious, philosophical, or of any other kind, that
is calculated to benefit mankind, ... [we] will embrace it” (John Taylor, *JD* 1:155). However, these same prophets also claim that the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ that are necessary for salvation have been revealed in modern times exclusively through them.

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