



Interpreter

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True and Living

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True and Living

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: *What does it mean for the Church to be “true and living”? Is it prideful to make such a claim? Why is it important that the Church be both?*

In a revelation given through Joseph Smith at Hiram, Ohio, on 1 November 1831, just slightly more than a year and a half after the founding of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Lord characterized the Church as “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, with which I, the Lord, am well pleased, speaking unto the church collectively and not individually” (Doctrine and Covenants 1:30).

It’s a pretty stunning statement, especially given the tiny membership of the Church at the time. It had expanded rapidly from its formal organization on 6 April 1830 — by the date of the revelation the number of Latter-day Saints had reached perhaps as many as 2,000, largely owing to the assimilation of Sidney Rigdon’s congregation in Kirtland, Ohio — but it remained a mere drop in the vast ocean of Christendom as a whole.

It can also be taken as a rather *offensive* statement. I recall a lengthy conversation that I had back in the early 1980s with my American downstairs neighbor in Egypt. A very friendly and kind man, he was the Lutheran pastor of the non-denominational expatriate church in the suburban town of Ma’adi, south of Cairo, and he had a lot of questions about our Latter-day Saint beliefs. They were questions that he had long suppressed out of, I suppose, a desire not to rupture our friendship. Now, though, he and his family and I and mine would soon be leaving Egypt, and he had decided that this was the time to put those questions to me.

At one point in our discussion, we turned to the subject of the “Great Apostasy,” which is unavoidably entailed by the claim of a Restoration. Suddenly he asked, with some visible emotion, “Do you mean to say that there was nothing of any value in Christian history between the passing of the ancient apostles and 1820? That there is no truth in my church?”

I quickly assured him that was not at *all* what I meant to say. I can easily see, though, why an outsider might take it to mean essentially just that, and I don’t think that my attempt at assurance was entirely successful. Consider, for example, such familiar scriptural passages as this one:

I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: “they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.” (Joseph Smith—History 1:19)

Did Joseph Smith understand the Lord’s statement to him in the Sacred Grove as declaring the doctrines of other Christian churches to be completely false? Some may point to a later teaching where that seems to be the case:

The old Catholic church traditions are worth more than all you have said. Here is a principle of logic that most men have no more sense than to adopt. I will illustrate it by an old apple tree. Here jumps off a branch and says, I am the true tree, and you are corrupt. If the whole tree is corrupt, are not its branches corrupt? If the Catholic religion is a false religion, how can any true religion come out of it? If the Catholic church is bad, how can any good thing come out of it?¹

So, was he saying that Christendom beyond the Restoration is entirely false, both root and branch? That, since the Catholic Church is completely bad, its Protestant offspring must therefore also be totally false and bad? It seems clear that he did not:

1. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1949), 6:478, archive.org/details/church-history-vol-6_202006/page/478/mode/2up.

Have the Presbyterians any truth? Yes. Have the Baptists, Methodists, [etc.] any truth? Yes. They all have a little truth mixed with error. We should gather all the good and true principles in the world and treasure them up, or we shall not come out true "Mormons."²

Or, as another report of that discourse cites him, "If the Presbyterians have any truth, embrace that. If the Baptists and Methodists have truth, embrace that too."³ In comments given on 22 January 1843 in Nauvoo, Illinois, he remarked that "We don't ask any people to throw away any good they have got; we only ask them to come and get more."⁴ "If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy," reads the thirteenth Article of Faith, "we seek after these things." Surely such things, worthy of being sought after, can be found in denominations other than just The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

It seems obvious that Joseph plainly doesn't seem to be saying that the Church holds an exclusive monopoly on the truth. Nor do I see any reason to think that he believed the Church to possess all truth: There is no peculiarly Latter-day Saint doctrine of, say, the origin of homochirality in biomolecules, no official position on whether black holes produce thermal radiation, or whether a four-dimensional topological sphere can have two or more inequivalent smooth structures, nor any specific Church teaching on the precise reasons for the Western Roman Empire's collapse (e.g., whether barbarian pressure, economic stagnation, political corruption, internal division, some combination of the four, or something else altogether).

I do think it fair and accurate to declare that the Church claims to possess all of the truth or, perhaps better, all of the *truths* necessary for salvation and exaltation (as well as all of the necessary authority to perform the ordinances of salvation and exaltation).

But is there more to be said about the divine declaration that the Church is "true and living"? I think that there is, and that there is

2. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1949), 5:517, archive.org/details/church-history-vol.-5/page/516/mode/2up.

3. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 234, archive.org/details/wordsofjosephsmi0000unse/page/234/mode/2up.

4. *History of the Church*, 5:259, archive.org/details/church-history-vol.-5/page/258/mode/2up.

probably much more that we don't yet comprehend. I'll suggest a few thoughts in what follows here.

What is *True*?

First, let's consider the adjective *true*. Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary, which is a pretty good guide to the English used by Joseph Smith and in the Doctrine and Covenants, offers multiple definitions for the word *true*,⁵ among them:

Conformable to fact; being in accordance with the actual

state of things . . .

Free from falsehood . . .

Exact; right to precision; conformable to a rule or pattern; as a true copy; a true likeness of the original. . . .

Not false or pretended; real; as, Christ was the true Messiah.

All of these seem applicable and appropriate to what is being claimed at Doctrine and Covenants 1:30. But there are some other meanings given by Webster to which I want to call attention. The first of them is:

Genuine; pure; real; not counterfeit, adulterated or false; as *true* balsam; the *true* bark; *true* love of country; a *true* christian.

—The *true* light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. John 1:9.

This seems to me quite salient. One of the ideas being asserted at Doctrine and Covenants 1:30 seems to me, inarguably, to be the proposition that this Church—The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—is the genuine article, the real thing, not a counterfeit. That remains a breathtaking declaration, and it is closely related to another of the definitions supplied by Webster:

Rightful; as, George IV is the *true* king of England.

But the definition upon which I want to concentrate a little bit more is this one:

Faithful; steady in adhering to friends, to promises, to a

5. Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: S. Converse, 1828), s.v. “true”, webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/true.

prince or to the state; loyal; not false, fickle or perfidious; as a *true* friend; a *true* lover; a man *true* to his king, *true* to his country, *true* to his word; a husband *true* to his wife; a wife *true* to her husband; a servant *true* to his master; an officer *true* to his charge.

The modern English word *true* originates from the Old English *trēowe* ("faithful," "trustworthy") and ultimately from the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) root **deru-*, meaning "to be firm, solid, steadfast." (Our word *durable* has the same origin.) Interestingly, **deru-* is also connected to the PIE root for *tree* or *wood* (*dóru*), which was probably taken to imply something solid, reliable, and genuine. The etymological history of *true* is closely connected, too, with words such as *trust* and the archaic *troth* (referring to faith, fidelity, or a pledge), which derive from the same Germanic root, and to concepts of faithfulness, honesty, steadfastness, and reality.

The text of the wedding vows from the "Sarum rite" at Salisbury Cathedral—which largely formed the basis of the 1549 *Anglican Book of Common Prayer*—is interesting here:

I N[ame] take the[e] N[ame] to my weddyd wyf, to have and to hold fro thys day forwarde, for better for wors, for richer for porer, in sikenesse and in helthe, tyl deth us departe, yf holy Chyrche wyl it ordeyne; and thereto I plyght the my trouthe [pledge thee my troth].

I N[ame] take the[e] N[ame] to my weddyd husbonde, to have and to hold fro thys day forwarde, for better for wors, for richere, for porer, in sikenesse and in helthe, to be bonoure and buxum ["good/fair and obedient/pliant" ("bonny" from French *bon*; "buxom," meaning "compliant")] in bed and at bord, tyl deth us departe, yf holy Chyrche wyl it ordeyne; and thereto I plyght the my trouthe.⁶

My choice of this marital illustration is very deliberate, because it gets to the heart of what I want to say here. On more than one occasion in the Bible, the relationship between the Lord, on the one hand, and Israel or the Church, on the other, is compared to the relationship between a husband and a wife.

Thus, for example, in what surely must be reckoned among the most disagreeable ecclesiastical callings ever issued (you think service in

6. "Marriage Vows," *Wikipedia*, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marriage_vows.

the nursery is tough?), the prophet Hosea was commanded to marry the prostitute Gomer as a living allegory (see Hosea 1). Their marriage symbolized the Lord’s relationship with unfaithful Israel, where the people’s idolatry is treated as spiritual adultery, and Hosea’s painful experience mirrors God’s own heartbreak. Gomer’s predictable infidelity thereafter is followed by Hosea’s being commanded to buy her back and to love her again (Hosea 3), which illustrates the Lord’s persistent and redemptive love for his people despite their repeated straying.

It is in this context that the Savior’s teaching is to be properly understood:

Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee. But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign. (Matthew 12:38–39)

A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign. (Matthew 16:4)

Were there actual, literal, adulterers standing there among Christ’s audience of critical Pharisees and Sadducees? Very likely.⁷ But the Savior’s focus seems to have been on spiritual unfaithfulness, spiritual infidelity, the betrayal of God and our covenants in favor of selfish gratification or some sort of worldly alternative.

When, at Doctrine and Covenants 1:30, the Lord pronounces the Church “true and living,” I believe that he’s declaring it genuinely his and recognizing its faithfulness to him. It is “true” in analogy to the way that a faithful wife is true to her husband, or a faithful husband to his wife. This is much more and much deeper than merely affirming a creed or agreeing with a list of propositions.

What is *Living*?

So, what about the adjective *living*? The Lord describes his Church as both “true and living.”

It’s certainly possible for something to be genuine and *dead*. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, however, is *living*, which means, drawing upon some of the characteristics that are commonly

7. “Whenever you see a man seeking after a sign, you may set it down that he is an adulterous man.” Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 157.

used to describe life, that it grows and that, in a metaphorical sense, it metabolizes nutrients, converting them into energy. It responds to stimuli and it engages with and adapts to its environment—which means, yes, that, like living biological organisms, it evolves over time; it changes.

But, and this is vitally important, it remains *true*. I've always loved the phrase *semper reformanda*, which emerged out of the Protestant Reformation. Meaning "always reforming," it comes from the longer motto *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei* ("the reformed church, always reforming according to the Word of God"). The idea behind the phrase is simply that Christian churches must examine themselves continually to ensure that they are aligned with scripture.

The need for continual "reformation"—or, if you will, for "course correction"—seems an obvious one. Everything in our world is subject to entropy, to degenerative change and decay. Even merely driving down a straight highway, a driver needs constantly to work the steering wheel of her automobile so that she doesn't end up in a ditch on one side of the road or driving into oncoming traffic on the other.

What advantage, though, does The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints possess for remaining true to its Lord? It isn't dependent for its direction and guidance merely upon arguments that are based upon the scholarly perusal of ancient documents written in ancient languages for dramatically different cultures. It isn't a wife trying to remain faithful to the wishes and desires of a long-absent and uncommunicating spouse. It's not attempting to discern today's will of a master who, apart from a written testament deposited centuries ago, hasn't been heard from in many centuries. It is led by living prophets and apostles who receive ongoing guidance from a still-present, still-speaking Lord. That is why it is importantly and divinely described as both "true and living."

A Blessing and a Treasure

We Latter-day Saints have been blessed with a greatly enlarged canon of scripture. Not only that, but we enjoy the blessing of an *open* canon. One of the purposes of The Interpreter Foundation is to delight in the riches of the treasure that has been given to us—to celebrate it, deepen understanding of it, strengthen appreciation for it, and defend it against its critics.

This volume of the journal—its sixty-seventh—offers a wide

variety of insights from faithful Latter-day Saint writers and even a non-member author. I'm grateful for their offerings. I'm also deeply grateful for the reviewers, source checkers, editors, and donors who have made this volume possible. In particular, I thank Allen Wyatt, Godfrey Ellis, Brant S. Gardner, and Rebecca Reynolds Lambert for their dedicated editorial work on the contents of this volume. This journal and The Interpreter Foundation as a whole have been created and are largely sustained by the devoted contributions of volunteers and unpaid authors. For all that they do for *Interpreter* and, for that matter and much more fundamentally, toward the building of the Kingdom, I thank them.



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