

# Line upon Line

By [James B. Allen](#)

Church history reveals how the Lord has continually added to his people's knowledge and understanding.

On the evening of 21 January 1836, the First Presidency of the Church and the Patriarch, Joseph Smith, Sr., were holding a special meeting by candlelight in a room of the Kirtland Temple. Suddenly the heavens were opened to them and they beheld some magnificent visions. The Prophet Joseph Smith saw the celestial kingdom, and among the inhabitants of that kingdom was his long-deceased brother, Alvin. This astonished the prophet, who said that he "marvelled how it was that he [Alvin] had obtained an inheritance in that kingdom, seeing that he had departed this life before the Lord had set his hand to gather Israel the second time, and had not been baptized for the remission of sins."

It was a new thought, even to Joseph Smith, that people who had passed away without authoritative baptism could reap the same blessings in the world to come as those who were members of the restored Church. But some new information was about to be given to the Church, and as the prophet wondered at what he was seeing, the voice of the Lord came to him with these words:

"All who have died without a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God;

"Also all that shall die henceforth without a knowledge of it, who would have received it with all their hearts, shall be heirs of that kingdom;

"For I, the Lord, will judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts" ([D&C 137:7-9](#)).

Many years later another prophet, President Joseph F. Smith, was pondering the scriptures relating to the atonement. By this time the Church understood well the principle of salvation for the dead, but there was still a missing piece of information concerning the Savior's mission in the spirit world immediately after his death. President Smith had wondered how the Lord could preach to *all* the spirits in prison in the short time he was there. "As I wondered," he said, "my eyes were opened, and my understanding quickened, and I perceived that the Lord went not in person among the wicked and the disobedient who had rejected the truth. ...

“But behold, from among the righteous, he organized his forces and appointed messengers.”  
([D&C 138:29–30](#))

These two experiences represent one of the most fundamental concepts of the restored gospel: that of continuing, modern revelation through living prophets. The Lord has said that “he will give unto the faithful line upon line, precept upon precept” ([D&C 98:12](#)). Brigham Young told the Saints that knowledge and understanding come slowly, and that none of the revelations revealed *everything* about a subject. Said he:

“I am so far from believing that any government upon this earth has constitutions and laws that are perfect, that I do not even believe that there is a single revelation, among the many God has given to the Church, that is perfect in its fulness.

“The revelations of God contain correct doctrine and principles, so far as they go; but it is impossible for the poor, weak, low, grovelling, sinful inhabitants of the earth to receive a revelation from the Almighty in all its perfections. He has to speak to us in a manner to meet the extent of our capacities.” (*Journal of Discourses*, 2:314.)

Our knowledge of Church history suggests that this, indeed, has been the case. As the Saints have been prepared to receive new information, it has been given and as the programs of the Church have needed modification to meet new challenges, the prophets have been directed by the Spirit to institute them. The historical development of a few key practices and teachings in the Church shows how this process has continued.

Historically, most changes have been concerned with certain outward practices, procedures, and administrative duties. These have been particularly apparent in recent years in connection with the needs of a rapidly growing and ever more international Church. Joseph Smith anticipated this as early as 1842, when he observed “that which is wrong under one circumstance, may be, and often is, right under another” (*History of the Church*, 5:135). Elder Orson Pratt of the Council of the Twelve put it well in 1877, as the Church was perfecting some aspects of its organization: “To say that there will be a stated time, in the history of this Church, during its imperfections and weakness, when the organization will be perfect, and that there will be no further extension or addition to the organization would be a mistake. Organization is to go on, step after step from one degree to another, just as the people increase and grow in knowledge of the principles and laws of the kingdom of God.” (*Journal of Discourses*, 19:12.)

In 1962, Elder Harold B. Lee, then a member of the Council of the Twelve, used a very practical modern example of that principle. “It is sometimes very interesting to get the reaction of people,” he observed. “I recall when President McKay announced to the Church that the First Council of Seventy were being ordained high priests in order to extend their usefulness and to give them authority to act when no other General Authority could be present. I went down to Phoenix, Arizona, and I found a Seventy who was very much disturbed. He said to me, ‘Didn’t the Prophet Joseph Smith say that this was contrary to the order of heaven to name high priests as presidents of the First Council of Seventy when they were named in the beginning?’

“And I said, ‘Well, I had understood that he did, but had you ever thought that what was contrary to the order of heaven in 1840 might not be contrary to the order of heaven in 1960?’ You see, he had not thought of that. He ... was following a dead prophet, and he was forgetting that there is a living prophet today. Hence the importance of our stressing the word ‘living.’”<sup>1</sup>

The important thing for the Saints to understand is not just that change and development take place—that seems obvious—but also that changes are made by or under the direction of the living prophet. This is the practical application of the principle of continuing revelation.

Nevertheless, whenever new ideas or information have been presented to the Church, some members have expressed alarm and dissatisfaction. David Whitmer, one of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon, became disgruntled when Joseph Smith introduced the office of high priest. Little wonder that the Prophet went slowly in teaching new ideas.

“There has been great difficulty in getting anything into the heads of this generation,” he remarked one day, after giving a sermon on salvation for the dead. “Even the Saints are slow to understand. I have tried for a number of years to get the minds of the Saints prepared to receive the things of God; but we frequently see some of them, after suffering all they have for the word of God, will fly to pieces like glass as soon as anything comes that is contrary to their traditions.” (*History of the Church*, 6:184–85.)

Daniel H. Wells, a counselor to President Brigham Young, expressed the same lament in 1870. “How true it is that, when any new principle, or any new idea concerning an old principle is promulgated, the human heart seems to rise up in rebellion against it, and the Saints are no exception in this respect, for when the Lord condescends to reveal any new principle pertaining to their welfare and the building up of His kingdom on earth, many are ready, both in feelings and practices, to rise up and rebel against it.” (*Journal of Discourses*, 13:351.)

Some people, for example, have been needlessly concerned over changes in wording between the first publication of a revelation and its later publication in the Doctrine and Covenants. In most cases these represented no doctrinal development at all, but rather simply clarification or necessary administrative changes as the Church grew larger or its circumstances changed. In such cases the prophet who received the revelation in the first place acted under inspiration to make necessary modifications as the Lord enlarged his understanding and as the organization of the Church expanded. In each case the original revelation came in answer to prayer, and we have no doubt that the modifications were confirmed in the same manner. The new wording reflected the newly understood reality.

For example, when section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants was first recorded in 1830 it was called the “Articles and Covenants” of the Church. [[D&C 20](#)] It contained the basic instructions for elders, priests, teachers, and deacons. The offices of high priest, bishop, or high councilor had not been revealed. It was not until 1835 that a larger priesthood organization was revealed and implemented. When the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants appeared in 1835, Joseph Smith saw that some clarifying material was printed in this key revelation. Verses 65 through 67, for example, incorporated these new offices and explained how the vote of the Saints in sustaining priesthood bearers should be handled. [[D&C 20:65–67](#)]

Another example from the 1830s is the law of consecration. Between the time the original revelation first appeared in print in 1832, and its appearance in the Doctrine and Covenants in 1835, several administrative changes had taken place in the Church, and these naturally found their way into the new printing of the revelation. The bishopric, for example, was more fully organized, which may account for the fact that the original version said that consecrated property should be laid before the “bishop of my Church, and two of the elders,” while the later version read “the bishop of my church and his counselors.”<sup>2</sup>

The earliest printing also implied that anyone who left the law of consecration could take none of his property with him. The 1835 version modified the wording slightly and a later revelation clearly stated that the one who left could claim the property which had been deeded him by the bishop after his original consecration, so that “all things shall be made sure, according to the laws of the land.”<sup>3</sup> These clarifications were needed because of the legal circumstances in which the Church found itself. They were functional in nature and in no way affected the basic principles of consecration and stewardship that lay behind this important commandment of the Lord.

Besides such administrative clarifications, there have been a number of other developments. One example is the concept of Zion. Latter-day Saints today clearly understand that the term *Zion* has been used in at least three different contexts: (1) as a specific reference to the “New Jerusalem” to be built in Jackson County, Missouri, in preparation for the second coming of the Savior; (2) as a general reference to all of America, both northern and southern hemispheres; and (3) with reference to a people who are “pure in heart.”

These distinctions, though implicit in the scriptures, were not that fully understood by the early Saints. Even though *Zion* was referred to as the “pure in heart” as early as 1833 ([D&C 97:21](#)), a main emphasis in those days was on building the New Jerusalem. To go to Zion was to go to Jackson County, Missouri. After the Saints were driven out of Missouri, the continuing expression that they would “redeem Zion” was interpreted to mean that one day they would return.

Meanwhile, the Saints’ understanding of what “Zion” really meant began to enlarge. Before the exodus from Jackson County, Joseph Smith prepared a plat of the “City of Zion,” and indicated that this was the prototype of numerous such cities. “Fill up the world in these last days,” he told the Saints, “and let every man live in the city, for this is the city of Zion” (*History of the Church*, 1:358). “Stakes of Zion” were organized, which made it clear that Zion included more than the center place. This was joined in the minds of Church members with scriptural references to “enlarging the borders of Zion.” (See [D&C 82:14](#); [D&C 107:74](#); [D&C 133:9](#).)

In 1844, Joseph Smith announced with perfect clarity that all of America was Zion. On April 8 he declared, “You know there has been great discussion in relation to Zion—where it is, and where the gathering of the dispensation is, and which I am now going to tell you. The prophets have spoke and written upon it; but I will make a proclamation that will cover a broader ground. The whole of America is Zion itself from north to south.” (*History of the Church*, 6:318–19.)

The understanding of the doctrine of the gathering had an equally important development, and one that well illustrates the statement once made by the Prophet Joseph Smith that what is right under one set of circumstances may not be right under another. In this case no basic doctrinal principle was involved. Rather, it was the Lord giving special instructions to his Saints, according to the needs and circumstances of the times. Thus runs the course of continuous revelation.

The early revelations to Joseph Smith were filled with commands that the Saints should gather to the land of Zion, and particularly to the headquarters of the Church. The building of the kingdom, the First Presidency wrote in 1840, would require “the concentration of the Saints, to accomplish works of such magnitude and grandeur . . . and everyone zealous for the promoting of truth and righteousness, is equally so for the gathering of the Saints” (*History of the Church*, 4:185–86).

Among other things, this led to the organization of a systematic immigration program, which was only intensified after Church headquarters were moved to Utah. “Emigrate as speedily as possible to this vicinity,” the Council of the Twelve advised the European Saints in 1847. They were told to bring everything and anything that would enhance the building of the new community of Saints in the West.<sup>4</sup>

So firmly and unequivocally was it preached that in 1862 a periodical published by the Saints in Germany called the gathering a commandment and criticized those who seemed hesitant: “We believe there are relatively few persons who could not find some way to obey this commandment at some time, since they became members of the church if they really knew the importance of the charge.”<sup>5</sup>

After this concept of the gathering had been taught so strongly for two generations or more it became almost second nature—especially to the Saints in Europe. But in the late 1890s certain circumstances were changing. American public policy toward immigration began to change. Economically, the Mormon communities in the Great Basin were filling up. New immigrants would find it more difficult to find employment. More important, the Church was more secure in its western setting. The kingdom had been strengthened in its new location, the days of pioneering were over, and the challenge now was to build up Zion—the “pure in heart”—throughout the world. This, after all, was clearly the larger mission of the Church all along.

These and other considerations undoubtedly led Church leaders to consider prayerfully what should be done. In 1898 George Q. Cannon, a member of the First Presidency, announced that the Saints in various lands were being counseled to “remain quiet for a while; to not be anxious to break up their homes to gather to Zion” (In Conference Report, Oct. 1898, p. 4). By the following year it was concluded that it was no longer advisable for them to gather, even if they did so at their own expense.<sup>6</sup>

The change in policy was implemented rapidly. The Church undertook to furnish more permanent headquarters in the missions and to build more chapels as a way of encouraging converts to remain in their homelands. “We do not advise you to emigrate,” President Joseph F.

Smith told the Swedish Saints in 1910. “We would rather that you remain until you have been well established in the faith in the Gospel.”<sup>7</sup>

It was understandably difficult for Saints who wanted to emigrate to accept the advice fully, and many continued to come. Acts of Congress after 1921 restricted immigration and established quota systems. After World War II there was some loosening of entry to the United States and numbers of members seized the advantage, some with American sponsors. But in 1958 three mission presidents in Europe issued a strongly worded editorial in *Der Stern* which epitomized the necessity to build Zion abroad:

“We have not discontinued to preach the Gathering of the House of Israel. We still call all people to come out of the spiritual Babylon, which means to come out of spiritual darkness. We are still gathering the children of light. We are still gathering scattered Israel. But we no longer urge them to emigrate to America. On the contrary, we tell the Saints exactly what the Lord required, namely to build up the stakes of Zion and to enlarge the boundaries of His kingdom. ...

“We believe that God directs His church through the words of His prophets. The world conditions have undergone a complete change and we must adapt to the new situation.”<sup>8</sup>

These developments are easily understood when placed in historical context. Others were not so clearly connected with specific historical events, but their history reveals a gradual unfolding of ideas, “line upon line, precept upon precept.” In some cases this unfolding of the gospel understanding made it necessary for the prophets not only to present additional information, but also to correct or enlarge upon old ideas or practices which had crept in.

The doctrine and practices relating to salvation for the dead are especially interesting in this respect. The question of salvation for the dead came forcefully to Joseph Smith in 1836, when he beheld in vision his brother, Alvin, in the celestial kingdom. But the doctrine of baptism for the dead was not yet understood by the Church, and the Prophet did not publicly preach it until 1840. Then, on 14 August 1840, he discussed it in a funeral sermon for Seymour Brunson. Two months later he officially informed the Council of the Twelve, most of whom were on missions in England. (See *History of the Church*, 4:231.)

The Saints in Nauvoo were happy to receive the new doctrine, and during the following year a number of baptisms for the dead were performed in the Mississippi River. On 19 January 1841, Joseph Smith received a revelation instructing the Saints to build the Nauvoo Temple, and one of its essential purposes would be to provide a specific sacred place for such baptisms (see [D&C 124:31–42](#)). In October, baptisms in the river were stopped, and the first baptisms for the dead took place on 21 November 1841, in the unfinished basement of the Nauvoo Temple. (*History of the Church*, 4:426, 454.) Thus the doctrine of universal salvation was enlarged and a new practice was put into effect more than ten years after the Church was organized.

Even with the inauguration of the new practice, the Saints’ understanding of the concept of salvation for the dead as taught in the Church today was not fully developed. When Joseph Smith died in 1844, the sealing ordinances of the temple had only recently been introduced, but the



extent of their application to the dead, as well as certain administrative details, was not yet clarified.

It was clear, however, that marriages must be performed by the power of the priesthood in order to be valid through eternity, and that children born outside such a marriage should be “sealed” to their parents by the authority of the priesthood in order to form eternal family relationships. A number of child-to-parent sealings took place before the Saints left Nauvoo. At the same time another concept, known as “adoption,” was introduced. Some Priesthood leaders permitted individuals and families who were not their natural children to be “sealed,” or “adopted” directly to them. In the life hereafter, then, it would seem that the eternal family would consist of all those sealed to that particular priesthood holder, whether they were his natural descendents or not.<sup>9</sup>

One entry in the journal of Wilford Woodruff tells how some of these new “families” were organized in 1847.

“President Brigham Young met with his company or family organization of those who had been adopted unto him or were to be, and organized them into a company. ... And they did enter into a covenant with uplifted Hands to Heaven with President Young and each other to walk in all the ordinances and commandments of the Lord our God. ...

“I, Wilford Woodruff, organized my family company this night at my own House consisting of 40 men, mostly Head men of families. Those that joined me entered into a covenant with uplifted Hands to Heaven to keep all the commandments and Statutes of the Lord our God and to sustain me in my office.”<sup>10</sup>

The sealing of parents to their natural children as well as the practice of “adoption” continued after the Saints were settled in Utah, especially after the dedication of the St. George Temple in 1877. People had free choice with regard to the person by whom they might be adopted, including adoption to a dead person, if approved by that person’s heir. By 1893 some 16,000 sealings had been performed for the dead as compared with some 13,000 “adoptions” for the dead.

How and why the practice of “adoption” got started is not clear from the records, but it is evident that Joseph Smith did not publish or publicly announce a revelation on the subject. Naturally it caused some confusion in the Church, and President Wilford Woodruff became especially concerned with its implications. In the April 1894 general conference he announced that he had received a revelation on the subject, which ended the practice of “adoption” and reaffirmed the importance of sealing within families. In announcing the change, President Woodruff emphasized the teachings of Joseph Smith with regard to the need for sealing of natural families.

“I was adopted to my father and should have had my father sealed to his father, and so on back; and the duty that I want every man who presides over a Temple to see performed from this day henceforth and forever, unless the Lord Almighty commands otherwise, is to let every man be adopted to his father. When a man receives the endowments, adopt him to his father, not to Wilford Woodruff, nor to any other man outside the lineage of his fathers. That is the will of God

to his people. ... I say let every man be adopted to his father; and then you will do exactly what God said when he declared He would send Elijah the prophet in the last day.”<sup>11</sup>

The results of the new revelation were impressive. Before this time relatively little genealogical work had been done among the members of the Church, and little effort had apparently been made to seal parents to children beyond one or two generations back. Now, President Woodruff told the Saints to trace their genealogies as far as they could and to perform sealings in order to “run this chain through as far as you can get it.”

A month later the Church-sponsored Genealogical Society of Utah was formed. With this stimulus a greater interest in genealogical research soon spread throughout the Church. In addition, Church leaders increasingly emphasized the importance of the doctrine of salvation for the dead, and in 1918 President Joseph F. Smith announced his vision concerning the redemption of the dead. Thus the practices connected with the principle of salvation for the dead were further clarified some eighty-two years after Joseph Smith’s vision of his brother Alvin.

Another practice was that of rebaptism. It was always clear that baptism by immersion for the remission of sins was essential to salvation, and that this ordinance must be performed by one holding proper priesthood authority. However, in the nineteenth century it was not uncommon for members of the Church occasionally to be rebaptized, even though they had not left the Church before the second baptism. Some were rebaptized simply because their original records had been lost. More common was the practice of rebaptism in order to rededicate oneself to the building up of the kingdom. Setting the example were Brigham Young and other General Authorities when they were rebaptized on 6 August 1847, shortly after they entered the valley of the Great Salt Lake. This was a new beginning for them, a time of rededication, and their rebaptism was a symbolic representation of this idea. They did it, said Brigham Young, “to set an example to the Church, and recommend that all who desire to be Latter-day Saints should be rebaptized and reconfirmed.”

“This we considered to be a privilege and a duty,” wrote Wilford Woodruff (Journal History, 6 Aug. 1847, p. 1).

Rebaptism as a sign of rededication continued throughout the nineteenth century. In 1853, Brigham Young gently chided some Saints who had only recently crossed the plains: “I have heard some of you cursing and swearing,” he said, “even some of the Elders of Israel. I would be baptized seven times, were I in your place.” (*Journal of Discourses*, 2:8–9.)

There were other occasions upon which people were sometimes rebaptized; for the sake of their health, for entry into the United Order, and even, in some cases, in preparation for marriage. In 1878 a circular letter from Joseph F. Smith of the Quorum of the Twelve gave instructions to bishops regarding those who should receive endowments and said, “No person, male or female, should be recommended for these ordinances, unless they have first renewed their covenants by baptism.”<sup>12</sup> So common were both rebaptism and reconfirmation that the printed forms for ward membership records, introduced in 1877, contained columns for officially recording them, and these forms were not replaced until 1900.



It became clear, however, that the practice of rebaptism could be abused. It could become all too convenient to regard it as an easy way to pay the consequences of sin. So it was that the leaders of the Church reconsidered that matter as time went on. In 1893 the First Presidency instructed stake presidents not to require Saints to be rebaptized before they received recommends to attend the temple dedication, for “the Lord will forgive sins if we forsake them.”

Finally, by 1897, the Brethren had decided to end the practice altogether. As explained by George Q. Cannon, first counselor in the First Presidency of the Church, “We hear a good deal of talk about rebaptism, and the First Presidency and the Twelve have felt that so much rebaptism ought to be stopped. Men, when they commit sin, think if they can only get the Bishop to re-baptize them, they are all right and their sins are condoned. It is a fallacy; it will lead to destruction. There is no such thing in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is repentance from sin that will save you, not re-baptism.” (In Conference Report, Oct. 1897, p. 68.)

The practice of rebaptism thus was discontinued. The obvious redirection in policy was not a change in the fundamental doctrine of the Church concerning baptism. It was simply an inspired change in policy with regard to a specific variation in practice.

Finally, it is interesting to observe that LDS understanding of the nature of the Godhead has also seen considerable growth since the Church was organized in 1830. There was no question among the Saints from the beginning that God was a personal being, or that man had direct access to him through prayer. Joseph Smith had seen him, as well as his Son, Jesus Christ, in vision, years before the Church was organized.

But in the early years, few members of the Church were fully aware of Joseph Smith’s first vision, for at first he did not widely circulate any account of it.<sup>13</sup> Only in 1838, to correct “the many reports which have been put into circulation by evil-disposed and designing persons,” would he prepare it for publication ([JS—H 1:1](#)). Consequently, since there was no effort in the first few years of Church history to define precisely the full nature of the Godhead, many new converts undoubtedly kept some of their old sectarian ideas. In addition, their ideas may well have been reinforced by a few statements in the first edition of the Book of Mormon that did not clearly distinguish between the Father and the Son. Traditional Christian doctrine taught that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost were all one in substance, making Mary, the mother of Christ, literally the mother of God the Father. Certain Book of Mormon passages could be erroneously interpreted by some in such a way as to perpetuate this belief.

Some of these were corrected by Joseph Smith in the 1837 edition. In Nephi’s great vision, for example, where he saw the coming of the Savior, the first edition reads, “Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of God,” which is true enough, Jesus the Christ being a god; but the 1837 version and all subsequent printings clarified the phrase to “mother of the Son of God.”<sup>14</sup> A few verses later the first edition reads, “Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Eternal Father,” again true enough when properly understood, but the later version helped by saying: “Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father!”<sup>15</sup> Joseph Smith knew, by personal revelation, the nature of the Father and the Son, but by 1837 he also realized the possibility of the Saints misunderstanding these few Book of Mormon passages. His brief editing was an effort to clarify what was meant.

Many passages in the first edition of the Book of Mormon clearly identified the Savior as the Son of God.<sup>16</sup> But isolated verses were still not fully understood by some and were subject to misinterpretation. In 1916, the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve issued a carefully stated doctrinal exposition entitled *The Father and the Son*.<sup>17</sup> This statement clearly identified the various ways in which the term *Father* might be used in the scriptures, especially with reference to Jesus Christ, and helped thereby any who were inclined to misunderstand.

The 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants included an important, though unofficial, early statement of Church beliefs known as the *Lectures on Faith*. At this time Joseph Smith had announced no revelation on whether the Father had a physical body of flesh and bone, or on the nature of the Holy Ghost, and consequently the fifth lecture contained an incomplete description of the Godhead that might not be understood by members of the Church today. Nevertheless, Joseph Smith undoubtedly continued to meditate and pray on this and many other issues. Precisely when he may have received new revelation on this subject we do not know, but on 2 April 1843, he gave some important “items of instruction” at Ramus, Illinois, which stated with more clarity than ever before the physical nature of the Godhead and particularly the Holy Ghost. These instructions later became part of the Doctrine and Covenants: “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit. Were it not so, the Holy Ghost could not dwell in us” ([D&C 130:22](#)).

A year later Joseph Smith delivered one of his most famous discourses on the nature of God. Here he added great new insight for the Saints by explaining that God the Father was “once as we are now,” and that now he is “an exalted man. . . . It is the first principle of the gospel to know for a certainty the character of God, and to know that we may converse with Him as one man converses with another, and that He was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ Himself did.” (*History of the Church*, 6:305; this is from the King Follett funeral sermon.)

Thus, only a little more than two months before his death, Joseph Smith was continuing to clarify many things for the Saints, and laid the basis for the broadened understanding of the Godhead they hold today.

There is obviously always much to learn and relearn. Some Saints have speculated on many points relating to the Godhead. Because of such speculation many ideas not officially accepted by the Church have occasionally been circulated. While the reason for such speculation is understandable, the Saints have been cautioned constantly not to teach for doctrine the personal opinions of men.

These are only a few examples, but they are sufficient to illustrate the fact that Latter-day Saint understanding, both individual and group, grows “line upon line” over the years. Some apparent changes have been related to specific historical circumstances. Others reflect refinements that come as Church leaders contemplate the issues and seek greater understanding through revelation.

The ideas and policies of the Church are clearly not stagnant. The door is open for the prophets of each generation to seek new insight and direction from the Lord.

Joseph Smith underlined this promise when he wrote, “We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God” ([A of F 1:9](#)). Brigham Young epitomized the unending search for truth when he said of the plan of salvation: “Such a plan incorporates every system of true doctrine on the earth, whether it be ecclesiastical, moral, philosophical, or civil: it incorporates all good laws that have been made from the days of Adam until now; it swallows up the laws of nations, for it exceeds them all in knowledge and purity; it circumscribes the doctrines of the day, and takes from the right and the left, and brings all truth together in one system, and leaves the chaff to be scattered hither and thither” (*Journal of Discourses*, 7:148; see also 11:213).

Certainly such an expansive concept of the search for truth suggests that no single generation has yet understood *all* the truth, and that many new things may well be discovered by or revealed to each new generation.

This concept of the expanding nature of gospel understanding has been accompanied by extreme caution, for Church leaders well understand the danger of being “tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine.” In spite of developments like those we have described, certain simple truths and fundamental principles remain constant. They include faith in the divine mission and literal atonement of Jesus Christ; belief in the power and authority of the priesthood, as restored through Joseph Smith, and in the necessity for priesthood authority in administering the ordinances essential to salvation; belief in the authenticity of the Book of Mormon and of the visions and revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith; and, of course, the assurance of continuous divine revelation in the Church.

With regard to new doctrine, President Joseph F. Smith expressed the following concern in 1918:

“It is a good thing for us not to attempt to advance new doctrine, or new and advanced thought in relation to principles and doctrines pertaining to, or presumed to pertain to the gospel of Jesus Christ, without weighing it carefully, with the experience of years, before you attempt to make a doctrinal test and to advance it to the people of the Lord. There is so much simple truth, necessary to be understood, that has been revealed to us in the gospel that it is extreme folly in us to attempt to go beyond the truth that has been revealed, until we have mastered and can comprehend the truth that we have. There is a great deal within our reach that we have not yet mastered.”<sup>[18](#)</sup>

We must keep in mind that only the President of the Church, the Presiding High Priest, is sustained as the Prophet, Seer, and Revelator of the Church who is empowered to announce new revelation. As President J. Reuben Clark, Jr., reminded the Seminary and Institute of Religion teachers of the Church in 1954, the prophet “alone has the right to receive revelations for the Church, either new or amendatory, or to give authoritative interpretations of scriptures that shall be binding on the Church, or change in any way the existing doctrines of the Church.”<sup>[19](#)</sup>

Part of the value in studying history lies in the confirmation one receives of the developing, expanding nature of the Church, its programs, its teachings, and the reality of continuous revelation. Latter-day Saints should not be surprised if, in the future, more new developments come. They need only ask themselves the question: Is not this, after all, the very essence of revealed religion?

Illustrated by Parry Merkley