

What is “Official” LDS Doctrine?

A vast number of anti-Mormon criticisms rely on the following straw man argument: LDS leader “L” said statement “X”. Since it has been shown that “X” is in error this proves that Mormonism is false. Is something “official” LDS doctrine because a General Authority or Prophet said it? What is and is not “official” LDS doctrine?

1. *Prophets are Infallible*

Infallible means “incapable of erring.”¹ While Catholic’s believe that the Pope is infallible in matters of doctrine, and while some Protestants believe that the Bible is “infallible,” Latter-day Saints do not believe that Prophets—neither past nor present—are infallible. President Charles W. Penrose of the First Presidency, for example, once wrote: “We do not believe in the infallibility of man. When God reveals anything it is truth, and truth is infallible. No President has claimed infallibility.”²

The Bible doesn’t suggest that prophets are infallible. Writing about the Old Testament prophet Elijah, James said that he was “a man subject to like passions as we are” (James 5:17). Jeremiah got so mad at God that he claimed the Lord had “deceived” him and he swore he would never speak in the name of the Lord again (see Jeremiah 20:7, 9.) Even Peter and Paul had disagreements (see Galatians 2:11-14).

Joseph Smith understood that he was fallible when he wrote: “A prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such.”³ On another occasion he said: “I am subject to like passions as other men, like the prophets of olden times.”⁴ He also declared: “I told them I was but a man, and they must not expect me to be perfect; if they expected perfection from me, I should expect it from them; but if they would bear with my infirmities and the infirmities of the brethren, I would likewise bear with their infirmities.”⁵ Lorenzo Snow, who had a testimony that Joseph was a prophet, nevertheless wrote that he saw Joseph’s “imperfections” and “thanked God that He would put upon a man who had those imperfections the power and authority He placed upon him... for I knew that I myself had weaknesses, and I thought there was a chance for me...”⁶ “We are all liable to err,” wrote Brigham Young “and many may think that a man in my standing ought to be perfect; no such thing.”⁷

2. *Prophets and Contemporary Beliefs*

Not only were Biblical prophets sometimes wrong, but often they believed in the prevailing—and at times incorrect—views of their day. Likewise, early Mormons understood things differently than we do today. Just as Biblical figures had a strange view about the shape of the earth (Isaiah 11:12) and the motion of the planets (Joshua 10:12–13) so likewise some early LDS leaders had some incorrect views. Joseph Smith and other early Latter-day Saints, for example, most likely believed that North America was the land northward and that South America was the land southward in the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon itself does not sustain this view (which

supports the claim that Joseph was not the “author” of the Book of Mormon).⁸ Along with other frontiersman of the day, Joseph and the early Saints saw no distinction between Indians anywhere in the hemisphere. Therefore to the early Saints, a “Lamanite” was any Indian.⁹ We know now that this view is incorrect.

Prophets are not raised in cultural vacuums. Moses wasn’t, Abraham wasn’t and neither were Joseph, Brigham, or Gordon B. Hinckley. Non-LDS scholars have recognized that Biblical prophets were wrong about certain cultural beliefs. The Rev. J.R. Dummelow has noted that Biblical prophets each had their “own peculiarities,” their “own education or want of education,” and that they were “each influenced differently... by different experiences...” “Their inspiration,” he explains, “did not involve a suspension of their natural faculties... it did not make them into machines—it left them men. Therefore we find their knowledge sometimes no higher than that of their contemporaries...” Concerning the author of Genesis, he remarks: “His scientific knowledge may be bounded by the horizon of the age in which he lived, but the religious truths he teaches are irrefutable and eternal.”¹⁰

Brigham Young apparently understood this concept of cultural perspective when he revealed his belief that of all the many revelations God has given to the Church, there wasn’t “a single revelation” given “that is perfect in its fulness.” “The revelations of God contain correct doctrine and principal,” he explained, “...but it is impossible for the ...weak... inhabitants of the earth to receive revelation... in all its perfection. He [God] has to speak to us in a manner to meet the extent of our capacities.”¹¹ Brigham even pointed out that in Joseph’s lifetime he “did not receive everything connected with the doctrine of redemption...”¹² What Joseph did receive, he received “piecemeal,” noted Joseph Fielding Smith. “It was not revealed all at once.”¹³

An evolving, growing, living Church, virtually guarantees that not all truth will be known on all things at all times. And when revelations are received, when new information is given, it’s only logical that such new information would be interpreted according to the understanding of the day.

3. *“Official” LDS Doctrine*

Not every utterance by every general authority constitutes “official” doctrine. “There are many subjects,” we read in the First Presidency-authorized *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, “about which the scriptures are not clear and about which the Church has made no official pronouncements. In such matters, one can find differences of opinion among Church members and leaders. Until the truth of these matters is made known by revelation, there is room for different levels of understanding and interpretation of unsettled issues.”¹⁴

Statements by leaders may be useful and true, but when they are “expressed outside the established, prophetic parameters,” they do “not represent the official doctrine or position of the

Church.”¹⁵ This includes statements given in General Conference. Conference talks—while certainly beneficial for the spiritual edification of the Saints—generally focus on revealed, official truths. They do not—by nature of being given in Conference—expound “official” doctrine. As Harold B. Lee said, “It is not to be thought that every word spoken by the General Authorities is inspired, or that they are moved upon by the Holy Ghost in everything they write.”¹⁶ To claim that anything taught in general conference is “official” doctrine, notes J. F. McConkie, “makes the place where something is said rather than what is said the standard of truth. Nor is something doctrine simply because it was said by someone who holds a particular office or position. Truth is not an office or a position to which one is ordained.”¹⁷

How do we know then, what is “doctrine”, and what is not? First it must generally conform to what has already been revealed. “It makes no difference what is written or what anyone has said,” wrote J. Fielding Smith, “if what has been said is in conflict with what the Lord has revealed, we can set it aside.” The standard works, he explains, are the “measuring yardsticks, or balances, by which we measure every man’s doctrine.”¹⁸

Harold B. Lee expressed similar thoughts when he taught that any doctrine, advanced by anyone—regardless of position—that was not supported by the standard works, then “you may know that his statement is merely his private opinion.” He recognized that the Prophet could bring forth new doctrine, but “when he does, [he] will declare it as revelation from God,” after which it will be sustained by the body of Church.¹⁹

The Prophet can add to the scriptures, but such new additions are presented by the First Presidency to the body of the Church and are accepted by common consent (by sustaining vote) as binding doctrine of the Church (See D&C 26:2; 107:27-31).²⁰ Until such doctrines or opinions are sustained by vote in conference, however, they are “neither binding nor the official doctrine of the Church.”²¹

How can we know if teachings, which have not been voted upon, are true? J. Reuben Clark explains that when “we, ourselves, are ‘moved by the Holy Ghost,’” then we know that the speakers are teaching true doctrine. “In a way, this completely shifts the responsibility from them to us to determine when they so speak.”²²

It is likely that the Lord has allowed (and will continue to allow) his servants to make mistakes—it’s all part of progression and the growing process. We are not forced to accept teachings with which we disagree. We’re supposed to receive confirmation from the spirit if what is taught is the doctrine of God, and of course we’re the one who put ourselves in jeopardy if we fail to accept things which will bless us.



For more details on this topic see
<http://www.mormonfortress.com/wordg1.html>

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¹ *Webster’s Super New School and Office Dictionary* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, 1974).

² Editor’s Table, *Improvement Era* (September 1912): 1045.

³ *HC*, 5:265.

⁴ *HC*, 5:516.

⁵ *HC*, 5:181.

⁶ Lorenzo Snow, private journal, quoted in Neal A. Maxwell, “Out of Obscurity,” *Ensign* (November 1984), 10.

⁷ *JD* 10:212.

⁸ See John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰ J.R. Dummelow, ed. *One Volume Bible Commentary* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), cxxxv.

¹¹ *JD* 2:314.

¹² Brigham Young, *Millennial Star* No. 8 (October 1, 1845), 6:119–123.

¹³ Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 2:168.

¹⁴ M. Gerald Bradford and Larry E. Dahl, “Doctrine,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. by Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:395.

¹⁵ Brent L. Top, Larry E. Dahl, and Walter D. Bowen, *Follow the Living Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1993), 118.

¹⁶ Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye in Holy Places* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company., 1974), 162.

¹⁷ Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Answers: Straightforward Answers to Tough Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1998), 213–214.

¹⁸ Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 3:203.

¹⁹ John A. Tvedtnes, “The Nature of Prophets and Prophecy.” (Unpublished, 1999, copy in my possession.)

²⁰ See also Bradford and Dahl, 395.

²¹ Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christian?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992), 15.

²² J. Reuben Clark, Jr., “When are the Writings or Sermons of Church Leaders Entitled to the Claim of Scripture?” speech given at BYU, July 7, 1954, published in the *Church News*, July 31, 1954; reprinted in *Dialogue*, 12:2, p. 68–69.