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# The Teachings of Church Leaders Regarding the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ: 1852–2018

*John Hilton III, Emily K. Hyde, and McKenna Grace Trussel*

From the beginnings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (herein referred to as “the Church”), the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ has been at the heart of its theology. In numerous revelations received by Joseph Smith, the Savior is identified as having been “crucified for the sins of the world” (D&C 53:2; see also 21:9, 35:2, 46:13, 54:1, 76:41). President Brigham Young taught that salvation was only “through the name and ministry of Jesus Christ, and the atonement he made on Mount Calvary.”<sup>1</sup> President John Taylor said that Christ “was crucified and put to death to atone for the sins of the world.”<sup>2</sup> President Wilford Woodruff stated, “The Lord Jesus was crucified on Mount Calvary for the sins of the world.”<sup>3</sup> And President Lorenzo Snow taught that Christ “sacrificed his life on Mount Calvary for the salvation of the human family.”<sup>4</sup> In 1918, President Joseph F. Smith wrote “that redemption had been wrought through the sacrifice of the Son of God upon the cross” (D&C 138:35), and in 1941, President Heber J. Grant testified that Christ “came to this earth with a divine mission to die upon the cross as the Redeemer of mankind, atoning for the sins of the world.”<sup>5</sup> In brief,

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1. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 9:365 (August 31, 1862).

2. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 25:177 (May 18, 1884).

3. Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses*, 15:7 (April 6, 1872).

4. Lorenzo Snow, *Millennial Star* 56 (July 16, 1894): 450.

5. Heber J. Grant, in *One Hundred Eleventh Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1941), 6.

every President of the Church has similarly testified that Jesus Christ was crucified for the sins of the world. At the start of the twenty-first century, the united First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve proclaimed that Christ was “sentenced to die on Calvary’s cross. He *gave His life* to atone for the sins of all mankind.”<sup>6</sup> Clearly, Christ’s Crucifixion is central to the theology of the Church.

Nevertheless, the first page of an online search of the words “Mormons” and “cross” displays an article that asserts, “Crosses are never used on any Mormon buildings. Strangely enough, Mormon leaders have often pointed to the Garden of Gethsemane as the place where Christ’s atonement took place.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, a frequent argument used against the Church is that it focuses primarily on Gethsemane and not Golgotha as the location of the Savior’s Atonement. Such statements are not only used to attack the Church; rather, interested and sometimes sympathetic scholars who have studied the theology of the Church have also pointed out a tendency to focus on Gethsemane.<sup>8</sup>

For example, Douglas J. Davies, an Anglican scholar who respectfully studies the Church, describes “the Mormon preoccupation with the Gospel of Luke’s account of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane,” arguing that Church leaders have developed the events of Gethsemane “to parallel and perhaps even to predominate over the Crucifixion of Calvary as the prime scene of the act of atonement.”<sup>9</sup> Latter-day Saint scholar Terryl Givens notes that Church members “shun virtually all representations of the cross and, by extension, the passion, in both art and sculpture.”<sup>10</sup> Michael Reed has written comprehensively about the history of the image of the cross within the Church, showing that while early Church members wore and displayed crosses, in recent decades it has become more of a taboo.<sup>11</sup>

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6. “The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles,” *Ensign* 30 (January 2000): 2, emphasis added.

7. Bill McKeeves, “Why No Crosses?” Mormon Research Ministry, accessed January 9, 2020, <http://www.mrm.org/no-crosses>.

8. This argumentation draws on John Hilton III and Joshua P. Barringer, “The Use of *Gethsemane* by Church Leaders: 1859–2018,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2019): 49–76.

9. Douglas J. Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 154.

10. Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 114.

11. See Michael G. Reed, *Banishing the Cross: The Emergence of a Mormon Taboo* (Independence, Mo.: John Whitmer Books, 2012).

While traditions surrounding the visual symbolism of the cross do not necessarily equate to an official theology of Christ's Crucifixion, they may partially explain why some Church members emphasize the events in Gethsemane more than the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup>

It is true that a small number of Church leaders have occasionally taught that Christ's greatest suffering took place in Gethsemane,<sup>13</sup> and noncanonical references such as the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* state, "For Latter-day Saints, Gethsemane was the scene of Jesus' greatest agony, even surpassing that which he suffered on the cross."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, some past Church curricula have emphasized Gethsemane over Christ's Crucifixion.<sup>15</sup> But do such statements accurately represent the teachings of the Church?

The standard works emphasize the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ significantly more than Gethsemane, with dozens more references to the salvific power of the cross as opposed to Gethsemane. This emphasis is consistent across the Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the Prophet Joseph Smith focused on the Savior's Crucifixion much more than he did on Gethsemane.<sup>17</sup>

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12. One BYU professor surveyed several hundred students and found that 88 percent emphasize Gethsemane over Calvary as the primary location of Christ's Atonement. John Hilton III, "Teaching the Scriptural Emphasis on the Crucifixion," *Religious Educator* 20, no. 3 (2019): 133–53.

13. See Hilton and Barringer, "Use of *Gethsemane*," 76.

14. S. Kent Brown, "Gethsemane," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:542–43.

15. For example, the 1979 institute and home-study seminary manuals quote statements to the effect that what happened in Gethsemane was more important than the cross. See *The Life and Teachings of Jesus and His Apostles*, 2d ed., rev. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979), 171; and *The New Testament Seminary Home Study* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1980), 57–61. While atypical, a 1980 Sunday School manual for teenagers included an object lesson specifically teaching that Christ demonstrated more love in Gethsemane than he did on the cross. See *Introduction to the Scriptures: Part B* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1980), 55; and Joyce N. Woodbury, "Christ's Atoning Sacrifice: The Role of the Crucifixion," *Sunstone Magazine* 42 (November–December 1983): 17–21.

16. See Hilton, "Scriptural Emphasis on the Crucifixion," 133–53.

17. See John Hilton III, "The Teachings of Joseph Smith on Gethsemane and Jesus Christ's Crucifixion," in *How and What You Worship*, ed. Rachel Cope, Carter Charles, and Jordan Watkins (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, forthcoming).

What have Church leaders collectively taught about Christ's Crucifixion? Have these teachings evolved over time? If so, in what ways? Do Church leaders consistently teach that Christ's agonies in Gethsemane surpassed the cross? The purpose of this study is to identify what Church leaders have taught about Christ's Crucifixion between 1852 and 2018 in *The Journal of Discourses* and in general conference talks. Before outlining the methodology of this study, we briefly survey what the scriptures themselves teach about the Crucifixion.

### SCRIPTURAL ACCOUNTS OF THE CRUCIFIXION

The narrative descriptions of Christ's Crucifixion are found in Matthew 27:31–56; Mark 15:20–41; Luke 23:26–49; and John 19:16–37. These Crucifixion accounts do not explicitly teach that Christ suffered for our sins while on the cross or that his Crucifixion was vital in our ability to be saved and resurrected. However, later New Testament authors and other books of scripture make Christ's death a salvific focal point. There are at least fifty-two references to Christ's Crucifixion redeeming us from sin; in contrast, only two references speak of Christ suffering for our sins in Gethsemane.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, each of the standard works contains multiple references to the redemptive power of Christ's Crucifixion. In the New Testament, Paul writes, "Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor. 15:3); Peter declares that the Savior "bare our sins in his own body on the tree [cross]" (1 Pet. 2:24). In vision, Nephi saw Christ "lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world" (1 Ne. 11:33), and Samuel the Lamanite stated that Christ "surely must die, that salvation may come" (Hel. 14:15). The Doctrine and Covenants says that "Jesus was crucified . . . for the sins of the world, yea, for the remission of sins" (D&C 21:9), and the Pearl of Great Price speaks of Christ being "lifted up on the cross" for the redemption of the world (Moses 7:55, see also Moses 7:45, 47). In his own accounts of his Atonement contained in scripture, Jesus Christ also emphasizes his Crucifixion.<sup>19</sup> For example, Christ made his Crucifixion central to his appearance to those in the New World. After he descended from heaven, he told the people, "Come forth unto me, that

18. See Hilton, "Scriptural Emphasis on the Crucifixion," 135.

19. See Hilton, "Scriptural Emphasis on the Crucifixion," 142–45. Elder Neal L. Andersen wrote, "The Savior most often refers to His Crucifixion when speaking of His perfect Atonement." Neal L. Andersen, *The Divine Gift of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2019), 92.

ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I . . . have been slain for the sins of the world” (3 Ne. 11:14). Later, he defined his gospel in part by saying, “My Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross,” indicating that the Crucifixion is a central part of his gospel (3 Ne. 27:13). Without doubt, the standard works accentuate the centrality of Christ’s Crucifixion in our redemption.

## METHOD

The purpose of the present study is to examine what Church leaders have said regarding the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ, following a methodology similar to a previous study focused on Gethsemane.<sup>20</sup> We used a corpus of talks found on the software program WordCruncher.<sup>21</sup> This corpus contains over 24,000,000 words and includes talks published in *The Journal of Discourses* (a collection of talks by Church leaders published primarily between 1852 and 1886)<sup>22</sup> as well as general conference talks for the years 1887–2018. We searched for the words *crucified* (and derivatives), *crucifixion*, *cross*, *Calvary*, and *Golgotha*. We also searched for the words *die*, *death*, *sacrifice*,<sup>23</sup> *slain*, and *lifted up* that occurred within one hundred words of “Jesus Christ” (or one of the titles *Messiah*, *Redeemer*, *Lord*, *Lamb*, *Savior*, or *Son of God*, or the word *sins*).<sup>24</sup> After

20. See Hilton and Barringer, “Use of *Gethsemane*.”

21. This program can be downloaded at <http://wordcruncher.com>. The work of Monte Shelley assisting us with organizing and formatting our data was invaluable.

22. We note that there are significant weaknesses associated with using *The Journal of Discourses* as a source. For example, there are differences between the shorthand notes and published versions of *The Journal of Discourses*. See Gerrit Dirkmaat and LaJean Purcell Carruth, “The Prophets Have Spoken, but What Did They Say? Examining the Differences between George D. Watt’s Original Shorthand Notes and the Sermons Published in *The Journal of Discourses*,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (2015): 24–118. While this does not necessarily weaken the numerical data we share in the present study, it is an acknowledged limitation. See also “Journal of Discourses,” Gospel Topics, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed January 9, 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/journal-of-discourses>.

23. Based on further analysis, the phrase “atoning sacrifice” was later specifically searched.

24. Our methodology leads to undercounting, given that we did not search for other titles (for example, “Jehovah”). Thus, a phrase such as “Jehovah died for the sins of the world” would not have appeared in our corpus.



eliminating duplicate passages (for example, “Christ was crucified at Calvary” would have showed up in two different searches), instances in which two words were repeated in close proximity,<sup>25</sup> and passages unrelated to the Crucifixion (for example, “The pioneers *crossed* the plains”), we had 3,377 total references, the first of which occurred in 1852.<sup>26</sup>

Our primary data was the one hundred words spoken before and after each use of the search term.<sup>27</sup> A complete table of these references is available online.<sup>28</sup> Once our corpus was in place, we read the excerpted text, looking for common themes. A process of emergent coding led to ten themes that we used to code each reference. Table 1 summarizes our coding structure.

**Table 1. Thematic Coding Structure**

| Code                     | Description  | Sample Quote  |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| Narrative                | Christ’s Crucifixion is mentioned only as part of a general narrative of his life. <sup>29</sup>                   | “In His last discourse to His disciples prior to Gethsemane and <i>Calvary</i> , the Savior declared that He was ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ (John 14:6).” <sup>30</sup> |
| Narrative + Resurrection | The Resurrection is mentioned only in close proximity to a narrative regarding Christ’s Crucifixion. <sup>31</sup> | “Jesus of Nazareth, born of the virgin Mary, <i>crucified</i> upon Calvary, and risen from the dead, is the Redeemer of the world.” <sup>32</sup>                               |

25. If a second reference to a key word appeared within fifty words of the first, it was considered a duplicate and deleted from the corpus. WordCruncher automatically filtered the search.

26. Our corpus contained only a handful of talks prior to 1852, and these were excluded from this study.

27. In sixteen instances, when it seemed that additional context would be helpful, we analyzed additional portions of the talk.

28. See John Hilton III, Emily Hyde, and McKenna Trussel, “Crucifixion Quotations for Distribution,” <https://www.dropbox.com/s/b61gr57n50payr7/Crucifixion%20References%20for%20Distribution.xlsx?dl=0>.

29. Any quote that received any other code was excluded from this code.

30. Sheri L. Dew, “Our Only Chance,” *Ensign* 29 (May 1999): 66, emphasis added.

31. Any quote that received any other code was excluded from this code.

32. Anthony W. Ivins, in *Ninety-Fourth Semi-annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1923), 141, emphasis added.

| Code                 | Description  | Sample Quote  |
|----------------------|--|---|
| Resurrection focus   | A focus on Christ's Resurrection, our resurrection, and/or Christ's post-Resurrection appearances. | "Our first parents . . . brought death into the world, but through the <i>death</i> of Jesus Christ, life and immortality were introduced." <sup>33</sup>   |
| Adjective for Christ | The Crucifixion is used to directly describe Christ. <sup>34</sup>                                 | "It is a time when our tears for the <i>crucified Christ</i> are wiped away." <sup>35</sup>   |
| Crucified for sins   | Quote includes specific references to redemption, related to Christ's Crucifixion.                 | "I know that Jesus Christ . . . was <i>crucified for the sins of the world</i> ." <sup>36</sup>   |
| Ordinances           | The Crucifixion is connected to an ordinance.  | "The <i>ordinance of the Sacrament</i> is also a sacred covenant. It reminds us of the great sacrifice of the Son of God upon the <i>cross</i> ." <sup>37</sup>                                     |
| Example              | The Savior's conduct during the events of the Crucifixion is used for us to follow.                | "In his agony on the <i>cross</i> , showing <i>the supreme example of forgiveness</i> , he cried out . . . 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.'" <sup>38</sup>                   |
| Suffering            | Quote specifically focuses on the suffering of the Savior on the cross. <sup>39</sup>              | "Christ has suffered more than any of us, and He knows the intensity of our afflictions. There is no suffering we have that He did not undergo in Gethsemane and on <i>Calvary</i> ." <sup>40</sup> |

33. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:344 (April 13, 1856), emphasis added.

34. If the adjective or descriptive clause appeared in a list, the quote received the code "narrative," not this code.

35. Carlos E. Asay, "Stay on the True Course," *Ensign* 26 (May 1996): 61, emphasis added.

36. Spencer W. Kimball, "An Eternal Hope in Christ," *Ensign* 8 (November 1978): 73, emphasis added.

37. Delbert L. Stapley, in *One Hundred Twenty-Ninth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1959), 109, emphasis added.

38. Eldred G. Smith, in *One Hundred Thirty-First Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1961), 69, emphasis added.

39. Several quotations described Christ's example in suffering well. If a quote was coded as "example," it was excluded from the "suffering" code.

40. Carlos H. Amado, "Overcoming Adversity," *Ensign* 19 (November 1989): 29, emphasis added.



| Code  | Description  | Sample Quote   |
|---|--|--|
| Wickedness of those who did or would crucify Christ | Description of the wickedness of those who crucified Christ or those who would crucify him afresh. | "They have the same spirit in their hearts that slew the prophets and put Christ to <i>death</i> ." <sup>41</sup>  |
| Spirit world  | A description of the Savior's ministry in the spirit world in connection with his Crucifixion.     | "Do you know where the Savior was during the three days His body lay in the tomb following the <i>crucifixion</i> ? . . . Peter, the apostle, said Christ preached to the spirits in prison who were disobedient in the days of Noah." <sup>42</sup> |
| Not focused on Jesus Christ                         | Quotes that are not focused on Crucifixion of the Savior.  | "Some were <i>crucified</i> as their master was; some were beheaded; and all, except John, suffered martyrdom in some way for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ." <sup>43</sup>  |

Each reference received at least one code but could receive more than one code depending on its content. For example, the following line from a talk by Elder Joseph Anderson received codes for both "Crucified for sins" and "Resurrection focus": "He died on the *cross to atone for the sin of Adam*, that we might receive forgiveness for our sins. . . . He arose from the tomb, the first fruits of the resurrection, *thereby making possible that all mankind may live again in a resurrected state after mortal death*."<sup>44</sup>

Two independent raters read each reference and assigned codes based on the above descriptions. Their codes were compared; in cases of disagreement, a third rater reviewed their work and made a final determination of the codes assigned.<sup>45</sup>

41. Charles W. Penrose, in *Journal of Discourses*, 24:214–15 (May 18, 1883), emphasis added.

42. David B. Haight, "Families Are Forever," *Ensign* 6 (November 1976): 21, emphasis added.

43. Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses*, 13:319–20 (September 5, 1869), emphasis added.

44. Joseph Anderson, "A Testimony of Christ," *Ensign* 4 (November 1974): 103, emphasis added.

45. Emily Hyde and McKenna Trussel did the initial coding; John Hilton III reviewed the coding process and resolved discrepancies in the codes.

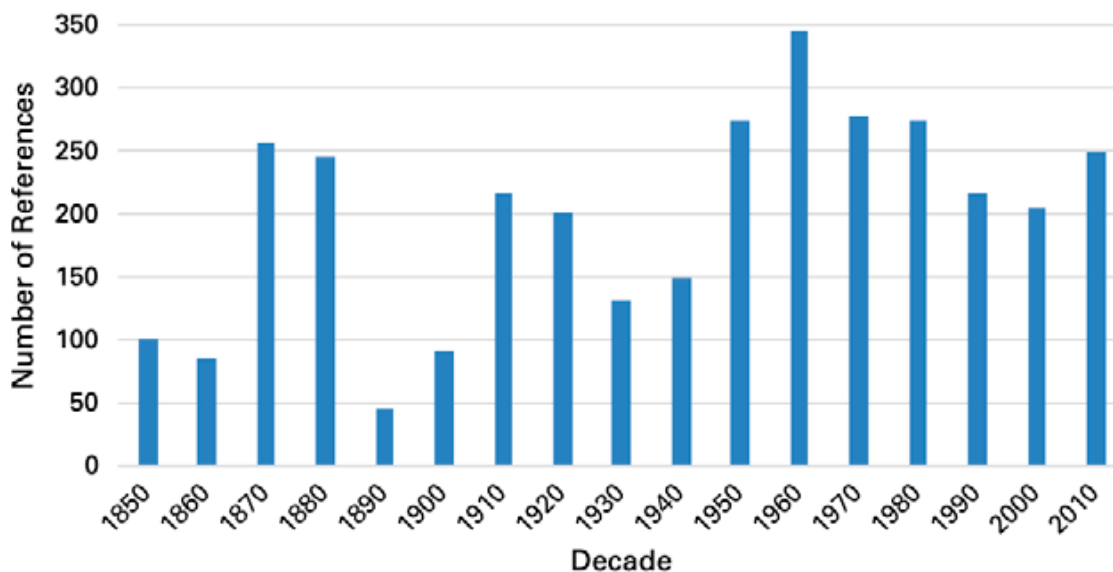


FIGURE 1. Discussion of the Crucifixion by Decade

### REFERENCES TO CHRIST’S CRUCIFIXION OVER TIME

Within our corpus, 332 speakers referenced the death of Christ a total of 3,377 times between 1852 and 2018. The three speakers who referenced the Crucifixion most frequently were Elder Orson Pratt (124), Elder Charles W. Penrose (93), and President Thomas S. Monson (90).<sup>46</sup> Figure 1 shows the frequency with which the Crucifixion of Christ has been mentioned over time.

This chart shows that the overall discussion of the Crucifixion has generally increased over time; the 1960s had the most references and the 1890s the least. However, some decades had more words spoken in general conference than others. For example, there were 1,728,512 words spoken in general conference in the 1960s versus 1,337,854 words spoken in the 1980s.<sup>47</sup> To account for this variance in words spoken per decade, we created a second chart normalizing the occurrences of words such as “crucifixion” (and the other words described in our methodology) to the total number of words spoken in each decade. These data are summarized in figure 2.

46. Within our corpus, Elder Pratt was number 10 in terms of total number of words spoken, Elder Penrose was number 43, and President Monson was number 3.

47. This is probably related to the reduction of conference from three days to two in April 1977 and the discontinuation of the Welfare session in 1982.

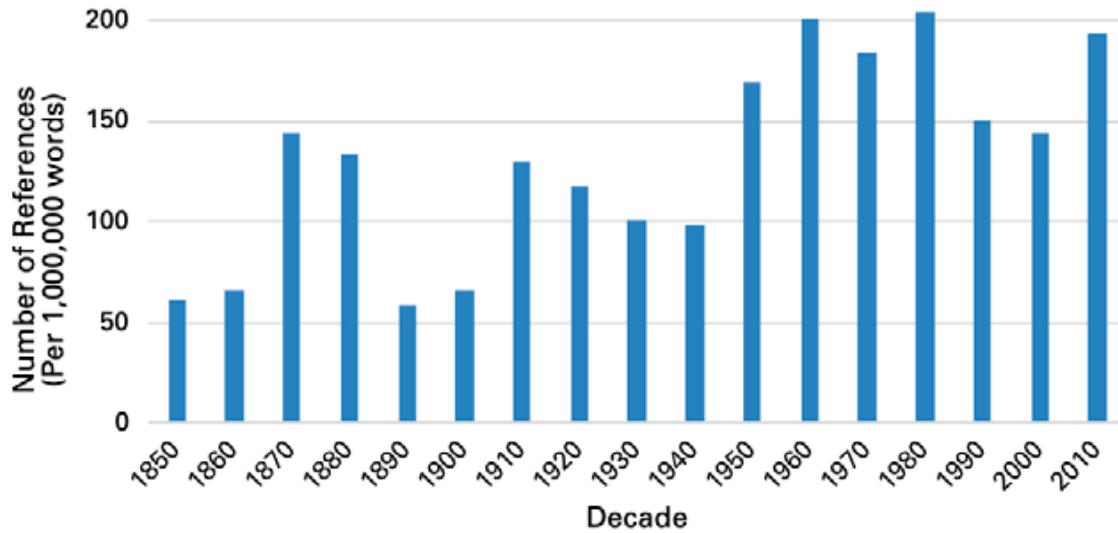


FIGURE 2. Discussion of the Crucifixion by Decade (Normalized)

Figures 1 and 2 have some small differences. When normalized by the number of words spoken, the 1980s mentioned Christ's Crucifixion more than the 1960s. While the 1890s is still the decade with the fewest references, it is significantly less of an outlier. Despite these differences, the charts are remarkably similar. Both show a general increase in the overall discussion of Christ's Crucifixion with similar trends over time.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to overall mentions of Christ's Crucifixion, individual themes as described in the aforementioned codes also have interesting trends over time. We divide our discussion of these themes into less frequently emphasized themes (used fewer than thirty times per decade), frequently emphasized themes (used more than thirty times per decade), and the most prominently emphasized theme.

### LESS FREQUENTLY EMPHASIZED THEMES IN RELATION TO CHRIST'S CRUCIFIXION

In this section, we examine how Church leaders have discussed Christ's Crucifixion in connection with the themes of spirit world, wickedness, example, and ordinances. At the end of this section, we discuss teachings regarding the Father withdrawing his Spirit from his Son, which, while not part of our original coding structure, surfaced in later analysis as an interesting insight provided by multiple Church leaders. Figure 3

48. For simplicity, throughout this study we do not provide dual sets of calculations and instead provide results of actual rather than normalized data.

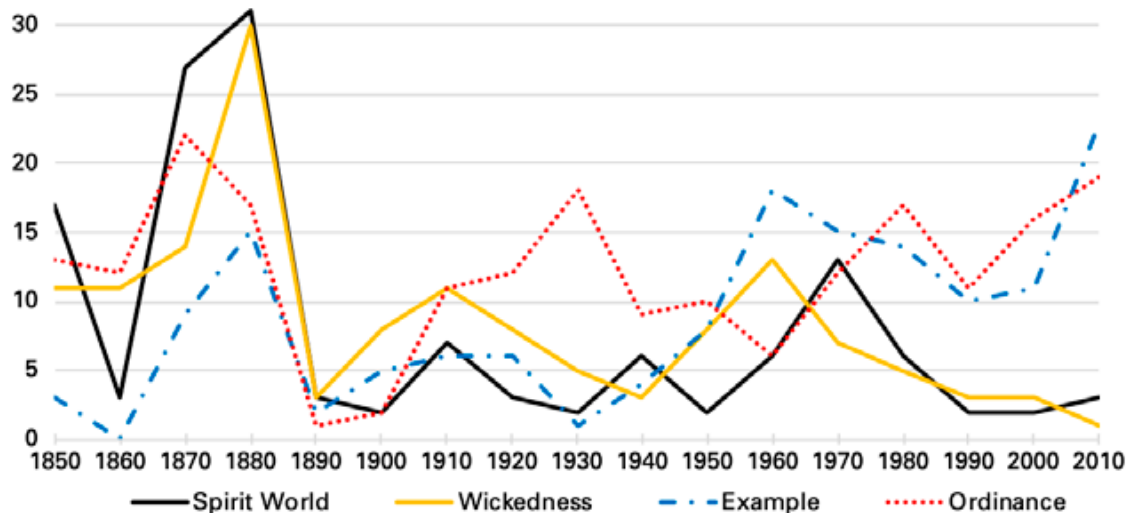


FIGURE 3. Less Frequently Emphasized Themes in Relation to Christ’s Crucifixion

illustrates how these themes have been used over time (the theme of withdrawal does not appear because of its low frequency—it appeared only fourteen times across the corpus).<sup>49</sup>

### The Spirit World

Through the 1880s, Christ’s Crucifixion was commonly discussed in connection with his ministry in the spirit world. After 1890, this was never a major theme. These discussions often used 1 Peter 3:18–19 to discuss Christ’s ministry in the spirit world. Another frequent reference point was discussion centered on Christ’s statement, “To day shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). While still not a prominent theme,

49. One interesting trend not illustrated in this chart is the overall decreasing use of references to Christ’s Crucifixion simply as part of a narrative (both the codes Narrative and Narrative + Resurrection are excluded from figures 3 and 4). The combined Narrative and Narrative + Resurrection codes overall were the most frequent code; however, each individually was less frequent than “Crucified for sins.” Using the Crucifixion of Christ in a narrative description went from being the dominant theme in the 1870s to being only the fifth most prominent theme in the 2010s. Two additional codes, “Suffering” and “Not focused on Jesus Christ,” were not included in figures 3 or 4. “Suffering” peaked in the 1980s with 24 references, followed by 12 references in the 1990s, but other than those two decades, quotes focused on Christ’s suffering on the cross were not prominent. “Not focused on Jesus Christ” was never a prominent code and never experienced any notable shifts.

the main focus of any remarks made since 1981 connecting Christ's Crucifixion and the spirit world has been the idea that salvation can be extended even to those who died without the gospel.

### **The Wickedness of Those Who Did or Would Crucify Christ**

Quotations describing the wickedness of those who crucified Christ or those who would crucify him afresh were most heavily emphasized in the 1870s and 1880s as speakers denounced “the spirit that crucified the Christ” and prescribed it as the same spirit that “brought about . . . the martyrdom of the prophet, revelator and seer, Joseph Smith.”<sup>50</sup> Church leaders also identified this wicked spirit as the cause of the intense persecution endured by the Latter-day Saints in the nineteenth century. Of the persecutors of the early Church, President John Taylor said, “Those very men that persecute us would crucify him, if he was here today.” However, the frequency of this theme continually declined throughout the twentieth century. In fact, between 2010 and 2018, it was mentioned only once.<sup>51</sup>

### **Christ's Example on the Cross**

There were 148 quotations (4 percent of the total) coded with the example theme, with increasing frequency in recent decades. Most commonly (49 percent of the example references), speakers used the example set by the Savior on the cross as he prayed for forgiveness of those who had just crucified him.<sup>52</sup> President Gordon B. Hinckley declared, “The great crowning love of the Savior was expressed when in His dying agony He cried out, ‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do’ (Luke 23:34).”<sup>53</sup>

Another common principle taught regarding the Savior's example on the cross is his endurance and desire to do the Father's will (33 percent of the example references). This was beautifully described by President

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50. Orson F. Whitney, in *Eighty-Eighth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1917), 50.

51. See Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Behold the Man!” *Ensign* 48 (May 2018): 107–10.

52. This passage (Luke 23:34) has a complicated textual history. See Nathan Eubank, “A Disconcerting Prayer: On the Originality of Luke 23:34a,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 3 (2010): 521–36.

53. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Forgiveness,” *Ensign* 35 (November 2005): 83.

Russell M. Nelson when he said, “Jesus Christ is our ultimate exemplar, ‘who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross.’ Think of that! In order for Him to endure the most excruciating experience ever endured on earth, our Savior focused on joy!”<sup>54</sup>

A third aspect of the Savior’s example as he died on the cross is his example of ministering and serving others even in the midst of his own trials (14 percent of example references). For example, Sister Ann C. Pingree taught, “As our exemplar, the Savior showed us what charity means through His own actions. Besides ministering to multitudes, Jesus demonstrated the depth of His love and care for His family. Even while suffering terrible agony on the cross, He thought of His mother and her needs.”<sup>55</sup>

### Christ’s Crucifixion and Ordinances

Across our corpus, 204 quotations (six percent of the total) related to ordinances. The three ordinances most frequently connected with Christ’s Crucifixion were the sacrament (60 percent), sacrifice in the law of Moses (19 percent), and baptism (18 percent). Though the subject of the sacrament and its connection to Christ’s Crucifixion has been taught since the earliest years of the Church, the frequency with which it has been discussed has varied; peak decades were the 1870s and 2010s (21 and 19 references, respectively).<sup>56</sup> President David O. McKay said regarding Church members in the first century, “When they met for worship they might meet as a body of brethren and sisters on the same level to partake of the sacrament in remembrance of the life and the death, particularly the death of their Lord.”<sup>57</sup> Elder Charles W. Penrose explained that this concept is true of modern members as well: “We take this sacrament . . . to witness that we believe in the atonement wrought out by the Lord Jesus on the Mount of Calvary.”<sup>58</sup> These and other quo-

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54. Russell M. Nelson, “Joy and Spiritual Survival,” *Ensign* 46 (November 2016): 83.

55. Ann C. Pingree, “Charity: One Family, One Home at a Time,” *Ensign* 32 (November 2002): 109.

56. In contrast, some decades had few (1900s, 1960s) or no references (1890s).

57. David O. McKay, in *One Hundred Sixteenth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1946), 112.

58. Charles W. Penrose, in *Journal of Discourses*, 22:83 (May 1, 1880).



tations indicate that Church leaders have taught that the Savior's Crucifixion should be a primary focus of our sacrament thoughts.<sup>59</sup>

Church leaders also taught that Christ's Crucifixion was a fulfillment of the law of Moses. For example, in 1873, President Joseph F. Smith (then a member of the First Presidency) said, "The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper . . . was instituted by the Savior in the place of the law of sacrifice which was given to Adam, and which continued . . . to the days of Christ, but which was fulfilled in his death, he being the great sacrifice for sin, of which the sacrifices enjoined in the law given to Adam were a similitude."<sup>60</sup>

Although statements connecting Christ's Crucifixion with the Mosaic law of sacrifice generally grew more frequent over time, statements connecting baptism with Christ's Crucifixion have become less common in recent decades. In the 1850s, there were eight mentions connecting Christ's death with baptism; however, from 2010 to 2018 there were no such references. Speakers who connected Christ's Crucifixion with baptism often followed Paul's lead and referenced Romans 6:3–6: "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death. . . . Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin." For example, Elder Parley P. Pratt taught in 1855 that the gospel includes "a voluntary baptism, . . . and what was it? The Apostle, in the New Testament, informs us that it was to be buried with Christ by baptism into his death, and rise to newness of life in the likeness of his resurrection."<sup>61</sup>

### **The Father Withdrawing His Spirit from the Son**

As recorded in Matthew 27:46, amid the agony of the cross the Savior cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"<sup>62</sup> While the

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59. For an analysis of the teachings of scriptures and Church leaders regarding the sacrament, see Ugo A. Perego, "The Changing Forms of the Latter-day Saint Sacrament," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 22 (2016): 1–16.

60. Joseph F. Smith, in *Journal of Discourses*, 15:324 (February 9, 1873). Elder Boyd K. Packer echoed a similar sentiment when he said, "The Mosaic law of sacrifice was fulfilled with the crucifixion of Christ. Anciently they looked forward to the atonement of Christ through the ceremony of the sacrifice. We look back to that same event through the ordinance of the sacrament." Boyd K. Packer, "The Aaronic Priesthood," *Ensign* 11 (November 1981): 31.

61. Parley P. Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:181 (August 26, 1855).

62. See also Psalm 22:1.

scriptures themselves do not directly state that the Father withdrew himself from Christ at this moment, some speakers have elaborated on this verse and “the apparent withdrawal of the Father’s spirit”<sup>63</sup> from the Son. President Brigham Young was the first recorded Church leader to teach this principle: “The Father withdrew His spirit from His Son, at the time he was to be crucified. . . . At the very moment, at the hour when the crisis came for him to offer up his life, the Father withdrew Himself, withdrew His Spirit, and cast a veil over him.”<sup>64</sup>

Over time, speakers have put forth several reasons why the Father apparently forsook his Only Begotten Son in his greatest hour of need.<sup>65</sup> In 1879, Erastus Snow taught that such “was necessary . . . otherwise [his enemies] never could have fulfilled what had been prophesied concerning him.”<sup>66</sup> In 1989, Elder Neal A. Maxwell explained that “this deprivation [which] had never happened to Christ before” was the means whereby “Jesus became a fully comprehending Christ and was enabled to be a fully succoring Savior,”<sup>67</sup> and “His empathy [was] perfected.”<sup>68</sup>

Some Church leaders have also clarified that God did not actually forsake his Son in his greatest hour of need but rather withdrew only momentarily. In 1906, Elder Charles W. Penrose explained, “God had

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63. Neal A. Maxwell, “Irony: The Crust on the Bread of Adversity,” *Ensign* 19 (May 1989): 64.

64. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:206 (February 17, 1856). Curiously, Brigham Young also states, “That [the withdrawal of the Spirit] is what made him sweat blood. If he had had the power of God upon him, he would not have sweat blood; but all was withdrawn from him, and a veil was cast over him, and he then plead with the Father not to forsake him.” It may be that Brigham Young draws a connection between these events, suggesting that the Father withdrew his Spirit in Gethsemane as well, or perhaps that Christ also bled from every pore on the cross. Alternatively, it may be that Brigham Young incorrectly conflated the passages on that occasion or that the scribe mistakenly did so.

65. While not part of our corpus, Elder James E. Talmage writes in *Jesus the Christ*, “In that bitterest hour the dying Christ was alone, alone in most terrible reality. That the supreme sacrifice of the Son might be consummated in all its fulness, the Father seems to have withdrawn the support of His immediate Presence, leaving to the Savior of men the glory of complete victory over the forces of sin and death.” James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1916), 601.

66. Erastus Snow, in *Journal of Discourses*, 21:26 (October 1879).

67. Neal A. Maxwell, “Bread of Adversity,” 64.

68. Neal A. Maxwell, “Apply the Atoning Blood of Christ,” *Ensign* 27 (November 1997): 23.

[not] forsaken Him, but He left Him to bear the brunt, that He might feel the pain, . . . that He might be touched with a feeling for our infirmities, because He bore the pains of us all.”<sup>69</sup>

Just four years later, Elder Melvin J. Ballard beautifully portrayed what Heavenly Father might have felt during this time when he saw Jesus

stretched upon the cross, and the nails driven into His flesh. He saw the quivering flesh, wounded and bleeding, of His beloved Son. Aye, He saw the life blood of His beloved Son streaming and gushing out, and He stopped it not. . . . I imagine that He had looked upon that Son until even the Father could not stand it, and He turned to some secluded spot and bowed and wept for the suffering of His Son, until, in the last agonizing throes of terrible suffering He [Jesus] cried, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” O I am so thankful in my heart that whatever doubts may have risen in His heart as He looked upon the suffering of His Son—“Shall I save him, or shall I allow him to suffer and die for the world?” O, I thank God that He decided in your favor and in my favor, and by that He has redeemed us.<sup>70</sup>

In 2009, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland articulated his feelings about this significant aspect of Christ’s Crucifixion:

It is my personal belief that in all of Christ’s mortal ministry the Father may never have been closer to His Son than in these agonizing final moments of suffering. Nevertheless, that the supreme sacrifice of His Son might be as complete as it was voluntary and solitary, the Father briefly withdrew from Jesus the comfort of His Spirit, the support of His personal presence. It was required, indeed it was central to the significance of the Atonement, that this perfect Son who had never spoken ill nor done wrong nor touched an unclean thing had to know how the rest of humankind—us, all of us—would feel when we did commit such sins. For His Atonement to be infinite and eternal, He had to feel what it was like to die not only physically but spiritually, to sense what it was like to have the divine Spirit withdraw, leaving one feeling totally, abjectly, hopelessly alone.

But Jesus held on. He pressed on.<sup>71</sup>

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69. Charles W. Penrose, in *Seventy-Sixth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1906), 90.

70. Melvin J. Ballard, in *Eighty-First Semi-annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1910), 83.

71. Jeffrey R. Holland, “None Were with Him,” *Ensign* 39 (May 2009): 87–88.

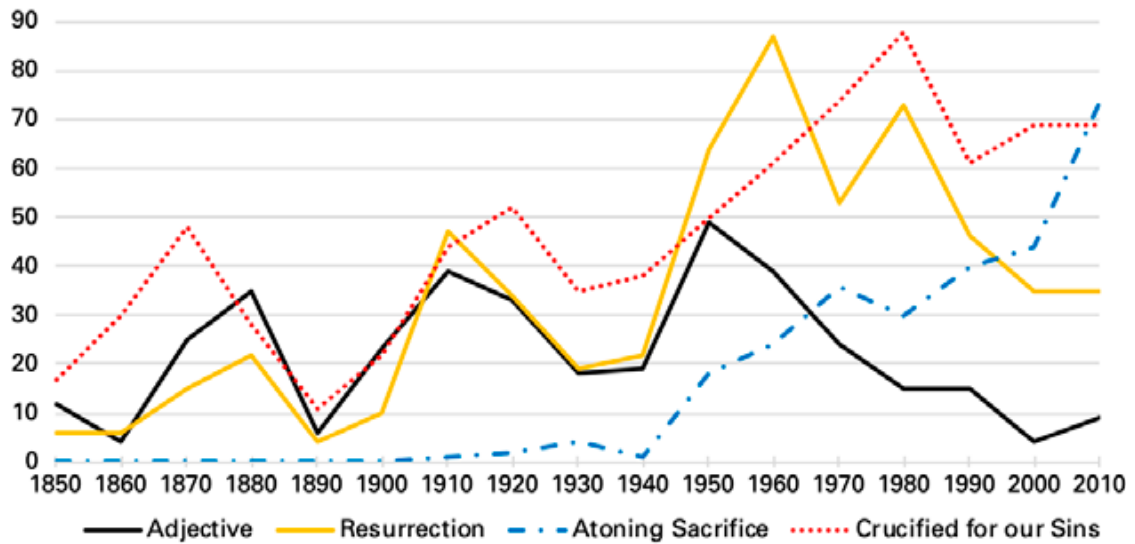


FIGURE 4. Frequently Emphasized Themes in Relation to Christ's Crucifixion

## FREQUENTLY EMPHASIZED THEMES IN RELATION TO CHRIST'S CRUCIFIXION

In this section, we explore how Church leaders have discussed Christ's Crucifixion in connection with the themes of Crucifixion as an adjective for Christ, the doctrine of resurrection, and the increasing use of the phrase "atoning sacrifice." Figure 4 illustrates how these themes, along with the most prominent theme, Christ suffering for our sins, have been used over time.

### *Crucified as an Adjective*

Using *crucified* as an adjective for Jesus Christ occurred most commonly in the 1880s, 1910s, and 1950s. After the 1950s, however, it declined steadily throughout the rest of the twentieth century. The most common usage of Christ's death as a descriptor was a statement such as "Jesus Christ . . . who died for the sins of the world."<sup>72</sup> Another common usage was a direct quotation or allusion to 1 Corinthians 2:2, where speakers asserted that they, like Paul, were "determined not to know any thing

72. Seymour B. Young, in *Seventy-Fourth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1904), 38. Forty-two percent of the references that were coded as "Adjective for Christ" contained a descriptive clause like the example here.

among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”<sup>73</sup> In addition, Church leaders frequently described Christ “as a lamb slain from the foundation of the world, chosen to come here and be the Redeemer,”<sup>74</sup> frequently in the context of the salvific nature of Christ’s death.

### **The Crucifixion and the Resurrection**

Discussion of the Resurrection in combination with the Crucifixion did not appear prominently in the early years of our study; in fact, two-thirds of the quotes that received this code came after 1950. One way speakers emphasized the Resurrection in connection with Christ’s Crucifixion was to speak of the literal and physical nature of his post-Resurrection appearances. For example, speaking of the experience of the disciples with the death and Resurrection of the Savior, Elder Samuel O. Bennion said, “They saw Him betrayed by Judas, and later crucified. They were witnesses of His burial in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, and finally they were eye witnesses of His resurrection. They saw Him after He came forth from the tomb, and heard His voice. Some felt Him, so that they knew He was not merely a spirit. They saw Him eat, and at last beheld Him ascend to His Father in heaven. They were in every sense of the word, witnesses of the Lord.”<sup>75</sup>

While this quote powerfully teaches the true nature of the Resurrection, it does not draw an explicit connection between Christ’s death and our ability to become resurrected. About one-fifth of the total references in our corpus coded as Resurrection illustrate a direct cause-and-effect relationship between Christ’s death on the cross and his subsequent power over death. For example, President Heber J. Grant taught that Christ “came to earth with a divinely appointed mission, to die on the cross, in order that you and I and all eventually may have part in the resurrection.”<sup>76</sup> Elder Hartman Rector Jr. similarly stated,

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73. Twenty-seven percent of the quotes that received this code were connected with this scripture.

74. Bruce R. McConkie, in *One Hundred Twenty-Second Semi-annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1951), 148. Ten percent of the references that were coded as “Adjective for Christ” described Christ as a sacrificial Lamb.

75. Samuel O. Bennion, in *One Hundred Tenth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1940), 91.

76. Heber J. Grant, in *One Hundred Fifth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ

“He was lifted up (crucified) by men, wherein he made the resurrection a reality.”<sup>77</sup> Thus Church leaders have connected Christ’s Crucifixion to both the reality of his Resurrection and the prospect of our own.

### Atoning Sacrifice

The phrase “atoning sacrifice” was never used in general conference until 1916. From 1916 to 1949, it was used a total of eight times. Beginning in the 1950s, there was a major increase in the use of this phrase. In the 2000s, it was the second most frequent theme among our codes and, as of 2018, was the most frequent in the 2010s. The phrase “atoning sacrifice” appears in the standard works only in Doctrine and Covenants 138, a revelation given to President Joseph F. Smith in 1918. While President Smith does not specifically define the phrase “atoning sacrifice,” the context of the revelation suggests that by it he meant “that redemption had been wrought through the sacrifice of the Son of God upon the cross” (D&C 138:35; see also 138:13).

Indeed, early usages of the phrase in general conference similarly indicate its connection to Christ’s Crucifixion. For example, in 1925, Elder John M. Knight referred to “the atoning sacrifice that [Christ] made on Calvary,”<sup>78</sup> and in 1974, Elder Delbert L. Stapley equated the “atoning sacrifice” with “the giving of his life.”<sup>79</sup> Although the word “sacrifice” as used in scripture clearly references death (see Lev. 16:11, 15; Alma 34:10–15; and Moses 5:5–7), there have been some instances in which this phrase has also been used by Church leaders to include Christ’s suffering in Gethsemane.<sup>80</sup>

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of Latter-day Saints, 1935), 10. See also Nathan Eldon Tanner, in *One Hundred Thirty-Fourth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1964), 59–64; and Theodore M. Burton, in *One Hundred Thirty-Sixth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1966), 32–35.

77. Hartman Rector Jr., “The Gospel,” *Ensign* 15 (November 1985): 75.

78. John M. Knight, in *Ninety-Fifth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1925), 36.

79. Delbert L. Stapley, “The Savior’s Ministry,” *Ensign* 4 (May 1974): 101.

80. For example, Elder W. Rolfe Kerr said that Christ “was alone in Gethsemane when He offered Himself as the sacred offering in that great atoning sacrifice—a sacrifice which He sealed at Golgotha.” W. Rolfe Kerr, “Behold Your Little Ones,” *Ensign* 26 (November 1996): 80.



Although we believe it is a reasonable assumption to count the phrase “atoning sacrifice” as a reference to Christ being crucified for our sins, given the uncertainty of precisely what each speaker meant by the phrase and in order to avoid overreporting the frequency with which Church leaders discuss the redemption of our sins through the Crucifixion of Christ, we coded the phrase “atoning sacrifice” as “crucified for sins” only if there was an explicit connection to Christ’s Crucifixion.<sup>81</sup> Consequently, the actual number of references to the expiatory nature of Christ’s ultimate sacrifice on the cross is likely greater than we report in the following section.

### **THE MOST PROMINENT THEME: CRUCIFIED FOR THE SINS OF THE WORLD**

The most prominent doctrinal theme discussed by Church leaders in connection with the Crucifixion of Christ is his Atonement for our sins. Excluding narrative references, approximately one out of every three uses of “crucifixion” focused on the redemptive nature of Christ’s death. A total of 796 references in our corpus refer to Christ’s atoning for our sins on the cross. This has been a relatively consistently discussed principle, with increasing emphasis in recent decades. The median point for these references is 1967, and the decade with the most references to Christ being crucified for our sins was the 1980s. In this section, we will describe how Church leaders mirrored the scriptural emphasis of Christ’s Crucifixion, taught about its redemptive nature, explained the individuality of Christ’s Atonement, and described Christ’s sufferings for our pains and sins on the cross.

#### **Quoting the Scriptural Emphasis on Christ’s Crucifixion**

Some of the emphasis by Church leaders on Christ being crucified for our sins reflects the overall scriptural emphasis on the redemptive nature of the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ; 241 (30 percent) of the total

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81. Any references to the “atoning sacrifice” that focused only on Gethsemane were excluded from our corpus. While beyond the scope of this study, we note that through the 1970s each decade had more references to Christ’s death than the term “aton\*” (including derivatives like “atoning sacrifice”). However, in the 1980s “aton\*” surpassed references to Christ’s death. References to Christ’s death declined in the 1990s and 2000s; however, usages of “aton\*” more than tripled between the 1980s and 2010s.

references coded as “crucified for sins” were quotations of scripture that teach the salvific character of the death of Christ. For example, in 1928, Elder Joseph W. McMurrin taught that “the Lord himself has declared the following in relation to the value of the souls of men: ‘Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God; For, behold, the Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh; wherefore he suffered the pain of all men, that all men might repent and come unto him.’”<sup>82</sup> This quotation from Doctrine and Covenants 18:10–11 underscores the great worth of our souls because of the immense price Christ was willing to pay in order to redeem them. This was the most common scripture in our corpus used to teach about the redemptive nature of Christ’s Crucifixion.<sup>83</sup>

The second most frequently used scripture was also found in the Doctrine and Covenants, in section 76, verses 41–42, which teaches that “he came into the world, even Jesus, to be crucified for the world, and to bear the sins of the world.”<sup>84</sup> The most frequently used scripture focusing on the salvific power of Christ’s Crucifixion from the New Testament was 1 Corinthians 15:3, which says, “Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures.”<sup>85</sup> From the Book of Mormon, the most commonly cited verse was 3 Nephi 27:14, in which Christ himself states he was “lifted up upon the cross, that I might draw all men unto me.”<sup>86</sup> These references and their reiteration by Church leaders emphasize the reality that Christ was crucified for our sins.

### **Christ Was Crucified for the Sins of the World**

The teachings of Church leaders have been explicit and consistent regarding the absolute necessity of the Savior’s Crucifixion for the expiation of our sins. In 1860, President Brigham Young taught, “Jesus was appointed, from the beginning, to die for our redemption, and he suffered an excruciating death on the cross.”<sup>87</sup> President John Taylor taught that Christ was “crucified . . . to open up the way of life and salvation,

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82. Joseph W. McMurrin, in *Ninety-Eighth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1928), 98.

83. Doctrine and Covenants 18:11 appeared 42 times in the corpus.

84. Doctrine and Covenants 76:41–42 was used 28 times.

85. 1 Corinthians 15:3 appeared 15 times.

86. 3 Nephi 27:14 was used 21 times.

87. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 8:115 (July 8, 1860).

that man might attain to exaltation,”<sup>88</sup> and President Wilford Woodruff said that the “Lord Jesus Christ . . . died as a ransom for the sins of the world.”<sup>89</sup> As stated above, similar statements have been made by every President of the Church.

Other Church leaders have also emphasized the supreme importance of Christ’s Crucifixion. In 1916, President Anthon H. Lund referred to the Crucifixion as the “all-atoning sacrifice.”<sup>90</sup> A few years later, in contrast to the more solemn tone with which the Crucifixion is usually mentioned, Elder Charles W. Penrose joyfully exclaimed, “Oh, what a blessing was his crucifixion to all the world . . . ; by and through him and his atonement we can be redeemed from the dead, from death, from hell, from darkness, from the grave, from everything that is hurtful and injurious and that brings unhappiness.”<sup>91</sup> In 1927, Elder Orson F. Whitney declared, “The Crucifixion on Calvary, the self-immolation of a God, is the Rock upon which the gospel rests—the Everlasting Gospel, the ladder unto life eternal.”<sup>92</sup> In 1969, Elder Alma Sonne taught, “The atonement wrought out by the Lord on Calvary is the greatest contribution ever made to the human race.”<sup>93</sup>

Recent Church leaders have continued this emphasis. In 1986, President Gordon B. Hinckley, then a counselor in the First Presidency, stated that through “the offering of His life on Calvary’s Hill, [Christ] expiated the sins of mankind, relieving us from the burden of sin if we will forsake evil and follow Him.”<sup>94</sup> In 2007, President Thomas S. Monson, then a counselor in the First Presidency, said Jesus “died upon the

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88. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 16:307 (November 16, 1873).

89. Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses*, 19:360 (June 30, 1878).

90. Anthon H. Lund, in *Eighty-Seventh Semi-annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1916), 13. This is the first recorded use of the phrase “atoning sacrifice” in our corpus.

91. Charles W. Penrose, in *Ninetieth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1920), 33.

92. Orson F. Whitney, in *Ninety-Eighth Semi-annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1927), 149.

93. Alma Sonne, in *One Hundred Thirty-Ninth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1969), 33.

94. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,” *Ensign* 16 (November 1986): 50.

cross to redeem all mankind.”<sup>95</sup> In 1999, Elder Russell M. Nelson, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, admonished us to “remember the Savior upon the cross suffering from the sins of the world.”<sup>96</sup> Such quotations indicate a consistent focus by Church leaders on the importance of Christ’s death so that we could be saved.

### The Individual Nature of Christ’s Crucifixion

In addition to the clear explanations regarding Christ atoning for our sins on the cross, many Church leaders have offered additional perspectives on the Savior’s Crucifixion. Elder Merrill J. Bateman of the Seventy taught that Christ suffered for us *individually* while on the cross: “For many years I thought of the Savior’s experience in the garden and on the cross as places where a large mass of sin was heaped upon Him. . . . However, my view has changed. *Instead of an impersonal mass of sin, there was a long line of people, as Jesus felt ‘our infirmities’ (Heb. 4:15), ‘[bore] our griefs, . . . carried our sorrows . . . [and] was bruised for our iniquities’ (Isa. 53:4–5). The Atonement was an intimate, personal experience in which Jesus came to know how to help each of us.*”<sup>97</sup>

This idea was taught in our corpus as early as 1929 by President Heber J. Grant: “Not only did Jesus come as a universal gift, He came as an *individual offering* with a personal message to each one of us. For each of us He died on calvary and His blood will conditionally save us. Not as nations, communities or groups, but *as individuals*.”<sup>98</sup> While not as explicit as Elder Bateman or President Grant, Sister Carole M. Stephens taught, “The Savior . . . understood their [the early Saints in Nauvoo] *personal adversity* because He suffered it for them in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross.”<sup>99</sup> Elder Gerrit W. Gong, then of the Seventy, also commented on the individual nature of the Crucifixion,

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95. Thomas S. Monson, “Mrs. Patton—the Story Continues,” *Ensign* 37 (November 2007): 23.

96. Russell M. Nelson, “Our Sacred Duty to Honor Women,” *Ensign* 29 (May 1999): 39.

97. Merrill J. Bateman, “A Pattern for All,” *Ensign* 35 (November 2005): 75–76, emphasis added.

98. Heber J. Grant, “A Marvelous Growth,” *The Juvenile Instructor* 64 (December 1929): 697, emphasis added. While this quote was not part of our corpus, we include it based on its relevance to this particular principle.

99. Carole M. Stephens, “Wide Awake to Our Duties,” *Ensign* 42 (November 2012): 116, emphasis added.

stating that Christ was “lifted up upon the cross that He might draw *each of us, by name, to Him.*”<sup>100</sup>

Another perspective on Christ’s Crucifixion for individuals was offered by President Lorenzo Snow, then of the First Presidency, as he shared his insight on what the Savior experienced on the cross:

When Jesus went through that terrible torture on the cross, He saw what would be accomplished by it; He saw that His brethren and sisters—the sons and daughters of God—would be gathered in, with but few exceptions—those who committed the unpardonable sin. That sacrifice of the divine Being was effectual to destroy the powers of Satan. I believe that to every man and woman who comes into this life and passes through it, life will be a success in the end. . . . God will have His own way in His own time, and He will accomplish His purposes in the salvation of His sons and daughters.<sup>101</sup>

Nearly a century later, Elder John H. Groberg echoed aspects of this sentiment: “I feel that as he hung upon the cross and looked out over the dark scene, he saw more than mocking soldiers and cruel taunters. . . . His huge, magnanimous, loving soul encompassed all eternity and took in all people and all times and all sins and all forgiveness and all everything. Yes, he saw down to you and to me and provided us an all-encompassing opportunity to escape the terrible consequences of death and sin.”<sup>102</sup>

### **Suffering Our Pains on the Cross**

In addition to the importance of the redemptive nature of Christ’s Crucifixion and its personal nature, some Church leaders have described how Christ suffered our pains while on the cross. As far as we can ascertain, Elder Orson Pratt was the first Church leader to connect Christ’s suffering our pains with his death: “Jesus has done his part: he has died for us—has got the plan all laid; his blood has been shed, and he has suffered the pains of all the children of men, and in their behalf, if they will only accept the conditions.”<sup>103</sup> However, this connection between

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100. Gerrit W. Gong, “Always Remember Him,” *Ensign* 46 (May 2016): 110, emphasis added.

101. Lorenzo Snow, *Millennial Star* 56 (January 22, 1894): 52.

102. John H. Groberg, “The Beauty and Importance of the Sacrament,” *Ensign* 19 (May 1989): 39–40.

103. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:258 (September 11, 1859). As Scott Woodward pointed out in a personal communication, it is important to

the Crucifixion and Christ's suffering for our pains did not occur again in our corpus until 1952, when Elder Milton R. Hunter similarly taught that "by his sufferings at Gethsemane and Golgotha . . . he took upon himself our sins and our sufferings if we will repent and keep all of his commandments."<sup>104</sup> Elder Neal A. Maxwell connected the Crucifixion most explicitly to both our physical and spiritual pains in 1987 when he said, "We can confidently cast our cares upon the Lord because, through the agonizing events of Gethsemane and Calvary, atoning Jesus is already familiar with our sins, sicknesses, and sorrows."<sup>105</sup>

### CHURCH LEADERS' EMPHASIS ON CHRIST'S CRUCIFIXION RELATIVE TO GETHSEMANE

As discussed in the introduction, some have stated that the Church emphasizes Gethsemane more than the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ. We compared our results to those of a previous study<sup>106</sup> focused on Gethsemane to analyze the extent to which this claim is true of talks given in *The Journal of Discourses* and general conference. As illustrated in table 2, in every decade the Crucifixion of Christ is referred to more frequently (often dramatically so) than Gethsemane. Within our corpus, for each reference to Gethsemane, there are approximately nine to Christ's Crucifixion.

It is true that in recent decades the gap between overall mentions of the Crucifixion and Gethsemane has narrowed (largely due to a significant increase in mentions of Gethsemane); however, there remain significantly more mentions of his death. When looking exclusively at references that specifically mention the redemptive nature of Christ's suffering in Gethsemane or on the cross, we see the same trend. These data are summarized in table 3.

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note that one of the definitions for "pain" in the 1828 dictionary is "penalty." Thus, in this quotation, as well as in 2 Nephi 9:21 and Doctrine and Covenants 18:11, "suffering the pains" of humankind could refer to suffering the penalty for their sins as opposed to physical or emotional discomfort.

104. Milton R. Hunter, in *One Hundred Twenty-Third Semi-annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1952), 39.

105. Neal A. Maxwell, "Yet Thou Art There," *Ensign* 17 (November 1987): 32.

106. Hilton and Barringer, "Use of *Gethsemane*."



**Table 2. References to Gethsemane and Christ's Crucifixion in *The Journal of Discourses* and General Conference, 1850–2018.**

| Decade       | References to the Cross | References to Gethsemane | Ratio of Quotes about the Cross Relative to Gethsemane <sup>a</sup> |
|--------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| 1850s        | 102                     | 1                        | 102:1   |
| 1860s        | 87                      | 0                        | N/A   |
| 1870s        | 258                     | 0                        | N/A   |
| 1880s        | 247                     | 2                        | 124:1   |
| 1890s        | 46                      | 2                        | 23:1  |
| 1900s        | 92                      | 3                        | 31:1  |
| 1910s        | 217                     | 8                        | 27:1  |
| 1920s        | 201                     | 10                       | 20:1  |
| 1930s        | 132                     | 9                        | 15:1  |
| 1940s        | 150                     | 19                       | 8:1   |
| 1950s        | 275                     | 26                       | 11:1  |
| 1960s        | 347                     | 37                       | 9:1   |
| 1970s        | 278                     | 36                       | 8:1   |
| 1980s        | 274                     | 66                       | 4:1   |
| 1990s        | 218                     | 50                       | 4:1   |
| 2000s        | 205                     | 49                       | 4:1   |
| 2010s        | 250                     | 77                       | 3:1   |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>3379</b>             | <b>395</b>               | <b>9:1</b>  |
| 1850–1979    | 2432                    | 153                      | 16:1  |
| 1980–2018    | 947                     | 242                      | 4:1   |
| 2000–2018    | 455                     | 126                      | 4:1   |

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a. Ratios rounded to the nearest whole number.

**Table 3. References to Christ’s Atoning for Sins in Gethsemane and through His Crucifixion in *The Journal of Discourses* and General Conference, 1850–2018.**

| Decade       | References to Christ Atoning for Sin on the Cross | References to Christ Atoning for Sin in Gethsemane | Ratio of Quotes about the Cross Relative to Gethsemane <sup>a</sup> |
|--------------|---|--|---|
| 1850s        | 17  | 1  | 17:1  |
| 1860s        | 30  | 0  | N/A   |
| 1870s        | 48  | 0  | N/A   |
| 1880s        | 28  | 0  | N/A   |
| 1890s        | 11  | 0  | N/A   |
| 1900s        | 22  | 0  | N/A   |
| 1910s        | 44  | 2  | 22:1  |
| 1920s        | 52  | 0  | N/A   |
| 1930s        | 35  | 2  | 18:1  |
| 1940s        | 38  | 4  | 10:1  |
| 1950s        | 50  | 7  | 7:1   |
| 1960s        | 61  | 3  | 20:1  |
| 1970s        | 74  | 9  | 8:1   |
| 1980s        | 88  | 31   | 3:1   |
| 1990s        | 61  | 21   | 3:1   |
| 2000s        | 69  | 32   | 2:1   |
| 2010s        | 69  | 35   | 2:1   |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>797</b>  | <b>147</b>   | <b>5:1</b>  |
| 1850–1979    | 510   | 28   | 18:1  |
| 1980–2018    | 287   | 119  | 2:1   |
| 2000–2018    | 138   | 67   | 2:1   |

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a. Ratios rounded to the nearest whole number.

Another way of looking at this phenomenon is analyzing the frequency with which the Savior's Atonement has been tied to each event. Between 1852 and 1979, the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ was used to describe expiation for sins 510 times; only 13 of those were linked to Gethsemane (2.5 percent). In contrast, between 1980 and 2018, Christ's Crucifixion was used to describe redemption from sin 287 times; 89 of these included a reference to Gethsemane (31.0 percent). This indicates a continuing emphasis on Christ's Crucifixion, with more connections to Gethsemane in recent years but still a much stronger emphasis on the saving nature of the death of the Savior.

This emphasis on the atoning power of Christ's Crucifixion is even more pronounced when looking only at the words of Church Presidents. For every one statement by a Church President about Christ suffering for our sins in Gethsemane, there are twelve statements from Church Presidents about him dying for our sins. Table 4 compares the total number of times each President of the Church mentioned the redeeming power of Christ's death and his suffering in Gethsemane.

These data illustrate that the prophets of this dispensation have clearly emphasized the atoning efficacy of the cross relative to Gethsemane. While a few Church leaders occasionally have explicitly or implicitly emphasized the role of Gethsemane over Christ's Crucifixion in the Atonement of Jesus Christ,<sup>107</sup> these are very few in number compared with the scores of instances in which Church leaders have referenced the salvific power of the cross without mentioning Gethsemane. Consider a few representative examples: in 1922, Elder Rudger Clawson taught, "The greatest event . . . in the life of the Savior, was the Crucifixion upon Mount Calvary, for therein did He give His life in atonement

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107. See Hilton, "Use of *Gethsemane*," 70. One of the individuals who on occasion elevated Gethsemane over the cross was Elder Bruce R. McConkie. However, in an *Ensign* article (not part of our corpus), he emphasized the cross, not Gethsemane: "A testimony in our day consists of three things: It consists of the knowledge that Jesus is the Lord, that he is the Son of the living God who was crucified for the sins of the world; it consists of the fact that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God . . . ; and it consists of knowing that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the only true and living Church upon the face of the whole earth." Bruce R. McConkie, "Gaining a Testimony of Jesus Christ," *Ensign* 10 (December 1980): 15.

**Table 4. Presidents of the Church References to the Crucifixion and Gethsemane**

| <b>President</b>          | <b>References to Christ Atoning for Sin on the Cross</b> | <b>References to Christ Atoning for Sin in Gethsemane</b> | <b>Ratio of Quotes about the Cross Relative to Gethsemane<sup>a</sup></b> |
|---------------------------|--|---|---|
| Joseph Smith <sup>b</sup> | 8  | 0   | N/A   |
| Brigham Young             | 29   | 0   | N/A   |
| John Taylor               | 11   | 1   | 11:1  |
| Lorenzo Snow              | 6  | 0   | N/A   |
| Joseph F. Smith           | 8  | 0   | N/A   |
| Heber J. Grant            | 17   | 0   | N/A   |
| George Albert Smith       | 2  | 0   | N/A   |
| David O. McKay            | 11   | 0   | N/A   |
| Joseph Fielding Smith     | 25   | 0   | N/A   |
| Harold B. Lee             | 3  | 0   | N/A   |
| Spencer W. Kimball        | 12   | 0   | N/A   |
| Ezra Taft Benson          | 5  | 2   | 2:1   |
| Howard W. Hunter          | 11   | 3   | 4:1   |
| Gordon B. Hinckley        | 19   | 3   | 6:1   |
| Thomas S. Monson          | 27   | 4   | 7:1   |
| Russell M. Nelson         | 10   | 4   | 3:1   |
| <b>Total</b>              | <b>204</b>   | <b>17</b>   | <b>12:1</b>   |

a. Ratios rounded to the nearest whole number.

b. These data were not part of our corpus but were drawn from Hilton, “Teachings of Joseph Smith on Gethsemane.”

for the sins of the world.”<sup>108</sup> In 1984, President Gordon B. Hinckley, then a counselor in the First Presidency similarly emphasized Christ’s Crucifixion without mentioning Gethsemane: “He ‘went about doing good,’ and was hated for it. (Acts 10:38.) His enemies came against him. He was seized, tried on spurious charges, convicted to satisfy the cries of the mob, and condemned to die on Calvary’s cross. The nails pierced his hands and feet, and he hung in agony and pain, giving himself a ransom for the sins of all men.”<sup>109</sup> In 2007, President Thomas S. Monson taught that Christ “died on the cross to atone for our sins”<sup>110</sup> with no mention of Gethsemane in his talk. This implicit emphasis on Christ’s Crucifixion is also evident in the document “The Living Christ” that mentions the Savior’s Crucifixion but not Gethsemane.<sup>111</sup> The foregoing is not to minimize the importance of Gethsemane but to demonstrate that an analysis of our corpus refutes claims that Church leaders underemphasize Christ’s Crucifixion relative to Gethsemane.

## CONCLUSION

Our analysis of quotations by Church leaders regarding the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ affirms that this sacred event is an essential part of Church doctrine. Beyond the frequency with which it is referenced, the theological richness of Christ’s Crucifixion is attested to by the many witnesses present in sermons from both *The Journal of Discourses* and general conference. It has been used to eliminate our excuses to withhold forgiveness or act selfishly in our hours of despair by encouraging us to follow the Savior’s example when he was crucified. It is repeatedly used to explain the symbolism behind the ordinances of baptism and the sacrament. Prophets and Apostles have also testified of our own deliverance from the grave through his death and Resurrection. Most commonly, Church leaders have repeatedly testified of the salvific significance of Jesus’s death upon the cross whereby he redeemed us from

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108. Rudger Clawson, in *Ninety-Second Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1922), 47.

109. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Cornerstones of Our Faith,” *Ensign* 14 (November 1984): 51.

110. Thomas S. Monson, “I Know That My Redeemer Lives,” *Ensign* 37 (May 2007): 25.

111. “The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *Ensign* 30 (April 2000): 2–3.

hell. These different doctrinal emphases all reassert the essential role of the Crucifixion in the Savior's Atonement.

Furthermore, the results of this study reveal that the collective teachings of Church leaders do not emphasize Gethsemane as the greater part of Christ's suffering for our redemption. In fact, they mention the saving importance of Christ's Crucifixion five times more often than they do Gethsemane. This does not diminish the role of Christ's suffering in Gethsemane; rather, it enriches our understanding of the significance of "his blood shed on the cross in the midst of suffering of infinite proportions."<sup>112</sup>

Gethsemane is an important part of Christ's Atonement; within the standard works, this knowledge is uniquely provided in Restoration scripture. Indeed, Robert Millet has suggested it is precisely because it is a distinctive doctrine that some Church members have sometimes emphasized it over the cross.<sup>113</sup> It is important to note that sometimes emphasizing what is distinctive rather than what is held in common can be detrimental. Speaking about the Trinity, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland stated, "Part of the reason we are so misunderstood by others in the Christian tradition is because in stressing the individual personages of the Godhead, we have not followed that up often enough by both conceding and insisting upon Their unity in virtually every other imaginable way. For this we have reaped needless criticism, and we have made our LDS position harder to be understood than it needs to be."<sup>114</sup>

We wonder if we could similarly paraphrase Elder Holland, saying: "Part of the reason we are so misunderstood by others in the Christian tradition is because in stressing the [importance of Gethsemane], we have not followed that up often enough by both conceding and insisting upon [the fact that Jesus Christ was crucified for our sins]. For this we have reaped needless criticism, and we have made our LDS position harder to be understood than it needs to be."

Given the above sentiment, those seeking to build bridges with other Christian communities may want to emphasize the salvific nature of Christ's Crucifixion as a core Church teaching. Moreover, many Church

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112. Mark E. Petersen, "O America, America," *Ensign* 9 (November 1979): 13.

113. Robert L. Millet, *What Happened to the Cross? Distinctive LDS Teachings* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2007), 107.

114. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Knowing the Godhead," *Ensign* 46 (January 2016): 37–38.



members will increase their understanding of the Savior's Atonement through a more in-depth and focused study of the Crucifixion. Such an understanding will lead to a deeper reverence and appreciation for Christ, who "was crucified and gave his life as a sacrifice for the sins of all men" and who "through that great act of atonement . . . became the Redeemer of all mankind."<sup>115</sup>

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115. Gordon B. Hinckley, "What This Work Is All About," *Ensign* 12 (November 1982): 7.