

# ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MORMONISM

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Edited by  
Daniel H. Ludlow

*The History, Scripture, Doctrine, and Procedure  
of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

Macmillan Publishing Company  
New York

Maxwell Macmillan Canada  
Toronto

Maxwell Macmillan International  
New York Oxford Singapore Sydney



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the works of Abraham to inherit the covenant and blessings of Abraham.

[See also Seed of Abraham.]

JOEL A. FLAKE

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## GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST

[This entry is discussed below under two headings:

The Gospel in LDS Teaching

Etymological Considerations for “Gospel”

*The first division outlines the Latter-day Saint conception of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the fundamental teaching of the Church, as it is presented in scripture and in the teachings of the modern prophets. The second explores the complex history of the term and its possible meanings, particularly in Greek-speaking New Testament times.]*

### THE GOSPEL IN LDS TEACHING

JESUS CHRIST and his APOSTLES and PROPHETS have repeatedly announced the “good news” or “gospel” that by coming to Christ, a person may be saved. The Father is the author of the gospel, but it is called the gospel of Jesus Christ because, in agreement with the Father’s plan, Christ’s ATONEMENT makes the gospel operative in human lives. Christ’s gospel is the only true gospel, and “there shall be no other name given nor any other way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent” (Mosiah 3:17; cf. Acts 4:12).

Even though Latter-day Saints use the term “gospel” in several ways, including traditional Christian usages, the Book of Mormon and other latter-day SCRIPTURES define it precisely as the way or means by which an individual can come to Christ. In all these scriptural passages, the gospel or DOCTRINE of Christ teaches that salvation is available through his authorized servants to all who will (1) believe in Christ; (2) repent of their SINS; (3) be baptized in water as a witness of their willingness to take his name upon them and keep his COMMANDMENTS; (4) receive the Holy Ghost by the LAYING-ON OF HANDS; and (5) endure to the end. All who obey these commandments and receive the BAPTISM OF FIRE AND OF THE HOLY GHOST and endure in faith, hope, and charity will be found guiltless at the last day and will enter into

the kingdom of heaven (Alma 7:14–16, 24–25; Heb. 6:1–2).

**THE PLAN OF SALVATION.** President Brigham YOUNG taught that the “Gospel of the Son of God that has been revealed is a plan or system of laws and ordinances, by strict obedience to which the people who inhabit this earth are assured that they may return again into the presence of the Father and the Son” (*JD*, 13:233). The gospel of Jesus Christ is a key part of the PLAN OF SALVATION (or plan of redemption), which provides an opportunity for all people to obtain ETERNAL LIFE. Because of the FALL OF ADAM, which has passed upon all individuals by inheritance, all are subject to a PHYSICAL DEATH and a SPIRITUAL DEATH (2 Ne. 9:4–12; D&C 29:39–45; 1 Cor. 15:12–22) and cannot save themselves. God, the loving Father of all spirits, has declared that it is his work and glory “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). For this purpose he provided a savior, Jesus Christ, who, because of his perfect LOVE, his sinlessness, and his being the Only Begotten of the Father in the flesh, was both willing and able to offer himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world (John 3:16). Through his atonement, Christ redeemed all men, women, and children unconditionally from the two deaths occasioned by the transgression of Adam and Eve, and will also redeem them from their own sins, if they accept and obey his gospel (Moses 6:62; D&C 20:17–25; 76:40–53).

**BASIC ELEMENTS.** Modern revelations state that the Book of Mormon contains “the fulness of the gospel” (D&C 20:9; 27:5; 42:12). Of all the standard works, the Book of Mormon contains the most detailed exposition of the gospel. In three separate passages the basic elements of the gospel are explained by a prophet or by Jesus himself (2 Ne. 31:2–32:6; 3 Ne. 11:31–41; 27:13–21). Each of these passages is framed by the affirmation that “this is my doctrine” or “this is my gospel.” The revelations to the Prophet Joseph SMITH confirm these Book of Mormon statements of the gospel in every detail (see D&C 18:17–23; 19:29–31; 20:25–29).

These core texts repeat the basic elements of the gospel message several times in slightly varied ways. Joseph SMITH referred to them in abbreviated form as “the first principles and ordinances of the Gospel” (A of F 4).

1. **Faith.** LDS teaching emphasizes FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST as the first principle of the gospel. The priority of faith is twofold. The individual who accepts the gospel must start with faith in Jesus Christ, believing in him and his power to save people from their sins. Without faith, no one would be strongly motivated to repent and to live the rest of the gospel principles. Faith is also fundamental to the other elements of the gospel in that each of them is dependent on acts of faith in important ways. In this sense, NEPHI<sub>1</sub> compares living the gospel to entering a strait and narrow path that leads to eternal life. The gate by which one can enter this path is repentance and baptism. With the guidance of the Holy Ghost, one can follow the path, exercising faith and enduring to the end. Thus, faith in Jesus Christ is a link between what one does to enter the gate and what must be done thereafter. One cannot have entered the gate by repenting and making baptismal covenants “save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save” (2 Ne. 31:19). After starting on this strait and narrow path, one cannot reach salvation except by “press[ing] forward with a steadfastness [faith] in Christ . . . feasting upon the word of Christ” (2 Ne. 31:20), which includes those things that the HOLY GHOST tells one to do (2 Ne. 32:3, 5).

2. **Repentance.** The centrality of faith is emphasized by the way the gospel is presented in the Book of Mormon, with faith usually mentioned in the center and the call to REPENTANCE at the first. Individuals must forsake their sins and offer up “a sacrifice . . . [of] a broken heart and a contrite spirit.” This requires that the sinner come down into the depths of HUMILITY and become “as a little child” (3 Ne. 9:20–22).

3. **Baptism.** The gospel emphasizes the absolute need for baptism for those accountable and capable of sin. Like repentance, baptism is also a commandment, and candidates for salvation must be baptized in order to obey the commandment (see 2 Ne. 31:6–7).

This essential ordinance is a witness to the Father that the repentant individual has covenanted with God to keep his commandments and has taken upon himself or herself the name of Christ. Faith in Jesus Christ, repentance, and baptism are the gate by which one enters into the way that leads to eternal life (2 Ne. 31:13–15). Because

infants are incapable of sin or of making such covenants, parents are instructed to prepare them for baptism by the time they reach eight years of age, the age of ACCOUNTABILITY established in revelation (D&C 68:25–28; see INFANT BAPTISM).

4. **The Holy Ghost.** While water baptism symbolizes purification and rising from death to life, the actual cleansing or REMISSION OF SINS comes by obedience, and as a gift from God “by fire and by the Holy Ghost” (2 Ne. 31:17; Matt. 3:11), by which the individual is BORN OF GOD, having become a “new creature” (Mosiah 27:24–26; 1 Pet. 1:23). This spiritual experience is a witness from the Father and the Son that the sacrifice of the penitent has been accepted. After Jesus had taught the Nephites and they were baptized, “the Holy Ghost did fall upon them, and they were filled with the Holy Ghost and with fire” (3 Ne. 19:13; cf. Acts 2:4).

The GIFT OF THE HOLY GHOST, administered by the laying on of hands by one having authority, includes the promise “If ye will enter in by the way, and receive the Holy Ghost, it will show unto you all things what ye should do” (2 Ne. 32:5). This gift is a constant companion by which the individual receives “the words of Christ” directly for guidance in his or her own life, in addition to inspired instruction from Church leaders (2 Ne. 32:3; see also John 14:26; 16:13).

5. **Endure to the End.** “Enduring to the end” is the scriptural phrase describing the subsequent life of a member of Christ’s church who has embraced the first principles of the gospel and has entered the gate that leads to eternal life. Once on this strait and narrow path, the member must press forward in faith, and continue in obedience to all the commandments of God.

Faith is linked with hope and charity. Receiving a remission of sins generates a hope of salvation. This is more than a desire, and gives a feeling of assurance. Such hope grows continually brighter through the workings of the Holy Ghost if one is consistently obedient (Ether 12:4). Charity, the “pure love of Christ,” is characteristic of those who obey the commandments (Moro. 7:3–4, 47). Such persons reflect to others the same kind of pure love that they experience from the Lord.

6. **Salvation.** In addition to receiving daily blessings, Jesus Christ promises that those who comply with all of the principles and ordinances will receive eternal life. As revealed to the Prophet Jo-

seph Smith, salvation entails becoming an HEIR to the fulness of the CELESTIAL KINGDOM (D&C 76:50–70).

All LDS standard works contain clear statements of the gospel of Jesus Christ (see D&C 10:63–70; 11:9–24; 19:29–32; 20:37; 33:10–13; 39:6; 68:25; Moses 5:14–15, 58; 6:50–53). Latter-day Saints find the same concept in many New Testament passages (Matt. 3:11; 24:13–14; Acts 2:38; 19:4–6; Rom. 1:16), although frequently only a few of the six key elements are specifically mentioned in any one passage. This is also true of the Book of Mormon. For example, the promise “They that believe in him shall be saved” (2 Ne. 2:9) may be understood as a merism (an abbreviation of a formula retaining only the first and last elements) that implicitly invokes all six components even though they are not mentioned individually. Another merism states that believing in Jesus and enduring to the end is life eternal (2 Ne. 33:4; cf. v. 9).

**OTHER MEANINGS.** Although emphasis is placed on truths necessary for salvation, LDS usage of the term “gospel” is not confined to the scriptural definition. Latter-day Saints commonly refer to the entire body of their religious beliefs as “the gospel.” By the broadest interpretation, all TRUTH originating with God may be included within the gospel. President Joseph F. SMITH said:

In the theological sense, the gospel means more than just the tidings of good news, with accompanying joy to the souls of men, for it embraces every principle of eternal truth. There is no fundamental principle, or truth anywhere in the universe, that is not embraced in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and it is not confined to the simple first principles, such as faith in God, repentance from sin, baptism for the remission of sins, and the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, although these are absolutely essential to salvation and exaltation in the kingdom of God [pp. 85–86].

Notwithstanding this wide range of meanings associated with the gospel, as President Smith explained, the saving truths encompassed by the first principles are indispensable and must be followed to obtain salvation. They are the central focus of the Church’s teachings and practices. Latter-day Saints are under strict command to share the fundamental, first principles of the gospel with others so that all may have an equal chance to obtain salvation. Proselytizing efforts of individual members and full-time MISSIONARIES are intended to invite

others to come to Christ through obedience to gospel principles and ordinances.

President Ezra Taft BENSON has similarly explained that “the gospel can be viewed from two perspectives. In the broadest sense, the gospel embraces all truth, all light, all revealed knowledge to mankind. In a more restrictive sense the gospel means the doctrine of the Fall . . . [and] atonement.” Clarifying the restrictive sense, he explained:

When the Savior referred to his gospel, He meant the . . . laws, covenants, and ordinances that men must comply with to work out their salvation. He meant faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, repentance from all sin, baptism by immersion by a legal administrator for the remission of our sins, and the receipt of the gift of the Holy Ghost, and finally he meant that one should be valiant in his testimony of Jesus until the end of his days. This is the gospel Jesus preached [p. 30].

Those who die without hearing the gospel while in MORTALITY will receive this opportunity in the SPIRIT WORLD. The necessary ordinances of baptism and the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost will be performed on behalf of the dead by living members in Latter-day Saint TEMPLES. The deceased will decide for themselves whether to accept or reject the ordinances performed in their behalf (*see SALVATION OF THE DEAD*).

**ETERNAL NATURE OF THE GOSPEL.** Latter-day Saints believe that the gospel has always existed and will continue to exist throughout the eternities. The Prophet Joseph Smith said, “The great Jehovah contemplated the whole of the events connected with the earth, pertaining to the plan of salvation, before it rolled into existence, or ever ‘the morning stars sang together’ for joy” (*TPJS*, p. 220). The eternal nature of the gospel was also emphasized by President John TAYLOR, who declared that “the gospel is a living, abiding, eternal, and unchangeable principle that has existed co-equal with God, and always will exist, while time and eternity endure, wherever it is developed and made manifest” (p. 88).

LDS scriptures explain that after the Lord had taught Adam and Eve the plan of salvation and the gospel (Moses 5:4–11), Adam was “caught away by the Spirit of the Lord” into the water where he was baptized. Following his baptism, the “Spirit of God descended upon him, and thus he was born of

the Spirit” (Moses 6:48–68). In later describing this experience, Enoch explained that God called upon Adam with his own voice, teaching him the same gospel set out in other scriptures:

If thou wilt turn unto me, and hearken unto my voice, and believe, and repent of all thy transgressions, and be baptized, even in water, in the name of mine Only Begotten Son, who is full of grace and truth, which is Jesus Christ, the only name which shall be given under heaven, whereby salvation shall come unto the children of men, ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost [Moses 6:52].

Latter-day scripture records that Adam and Eve taught their children the gospel, but that Satan came among them and persuaded some to love him more than God (Moses 5:13; *see* DEVIL). Thus it has been with the descendants of Adam and Eve, and in this situation, the Lord called upon people everywhere to believe in the Son and to repent of their sins that they might be saved. This gospel message was a “firm decree” sent forth “in the world, until the end thereof,” and was preached from the beginning by ANGELS, by the voice of God, and by the Holy Ghost (Moses 5:12–15, 58–59).

Latter-day Saints understand the history of the world in terms of periods of faithfulness and of APOSTASY. Although there have been many times when the gospel of Jesus Christ has been lost from the earth, it has repeatedly been restored through prophets sent to declare new DISPENSATIONS OF THE GOSPEL. The gospel has been given to successive generations and will maintain its efficacy forever. The RESTORATION of the fulness of the gospel to Joseph Smith initiated the “last dispensation,” or the DISPENSATION OF THE FULNESS OF TIMES, and he was promised that the gospel will never again be taken from the earth. The gospel of Jesus Christ continues to be the only means given under heaven whereby men and women can come to their Savior and be saved, and is the standard against which all people will be judged (*see* JUDGMENT DAY).

#### ETYMOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR “GOSPEL”

The English word “gospel” is derived from the Old English *godspel* (god story). It was chosen by English translators of the NEW TESTAMENT as a translation of the Greek *euaggelion* (Latin, *evangelium*) or “good news.” The term is used in the New Testament principally to refer to the message of salva-

tion through Jesus Christ, often referred to as the “gospel of Jesus Christ” (Mark 1:1) or the “gospel of the Kingdom of God” (Mark 1:14; Luke 8:1). The gospel or “good news” in the New Testament is the “glad tidings” to all that if they will come to Christ and keep his commandments, they will be saved (Matt. 7:21; Mark 16:15–16). PAUL uses *euaggelion* more than other New Testament writers, adopting both noun and verb forms of the Greek term. The practice of referring to written accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus as “gospels” arose among Christians in the first century and was well established by the second.

Although latter-day scriptures give a more definite and formulaic concept of the gospel, their teaching is consistent with and enhanced by scholarly reflections on the possible etymologies of the New Testament term. Both Hebrew and Greek antecedents occur in verb and derivative noun forms, the primary sense referring to the delivery of messages, particularly good news—victory in battle being a common example. This is expanded in Isaiah by application to the herald who announces the return of exiles to Jerusalem, proclaiming the good news of prosperity and deliverance and the kingship of Jehovah (Isaiah 52:7; *see* Friedrich, p. 708).

Ancient Greek usage of *euaggelion* included the ideas of liberation from enemies and deliverance from demonic powers. It can refer to oracular sayings, but more precisely to their fulfillment. This cluster of meanings made *euaggelion* an appropriate term for New Testament writers who understood the gospel as the means by which men can escape the evil powers of this world and as the fulfillment of ancient prophecies of a coming Messiah.

Religious usage of *euaggelion* before Christian times was common to the popular imperial cults in which the worship of Greek and Roman emperors was believed to bring wealth and power in various forms. When first used by Christians, this language must have been ironic, having the effect of forcing its hearers and readers to compare Caesar on his throne and Christ on the cross, and to make the corresponding choice between the universal pursuit of power and wealth (material benefits) in this world and the singular *way* of faith, repentance, and the Spirit taught by Jesus. This implicit comparison becomes explicit when three New Testament gospels report Jesus’ instruction to “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to

God the things that are God's" (Mark 12:17; cf. Matt. 22:21 and Luke 20:25). Paul uses the same irony when he calls the gospel a mystery (see Friedrich, pp. 712, 723–25; Eph. 6:19). The disappointment of some with Jesus as Messiah was precisely that he was not the kind of savior worshiped in the cults of emperors.

The Book of Mormon uses the terms "gospel" and "doctrine" interchangeably, in a way that is consistent with New Testament usage, at least to the extent that both imply communications that can be reduced to verbal statements (see DOCTRINE). The New Testament term "doctrine" (*didaskalia*) means "teaching" and refers either to the doctrine of Christ, or to the vain teachings of people or devils. Similarly, Book of Mormon writers use both "gospel" and "doctrine" to refer to a teaching that can be reduced to a set of statements or "points of . . . doctrine" (1 Ne. 15:14; Hel. 11:22).

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NOEL B. REYNOLDS

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## GRACE

One of the most controversial issues in Christian theology is whether salvation is the free gift of unmerited grace or is earned through good WORKS. Paul's statement that "a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law" (Rom. 3:28) is frequently cited to support the former view, while James's statement that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:20) is often quoted in favor of the

latter view. The LDS doctrine that salvation requires *both* grace and works is a revealed yet commonsense reconciliation of these contradictory positions.

C. S. Lewis wrote that this dispute "does seem to me like asking which blade in a pair of scissors is most necessary" (p. 129). And in one way or another almost all Christian denominations ultimately accept the need for both grace and works, but the differences in meaning and emphasis among the various doctrinal traditions remain substantial.

LDS doctrine contains an affirmative sense of interaction between grace and works that is unique not only as to these concepts but also reflects the uniqueness of the restored gospel's view of man's nature, the FALL OF ADAM, the ATONEMENT, and the process of salvation. At the same time, the LDS view contains features that are similar to basic elements of some other traditions. For example, the LDS insistence that such works as ORDINANCES be performed with proper priesthood AUTHORITY resembles the Catholic teaching that its sacraments are the requisite channels of grace. Also the LDS emphasis on the indispensability of personal faith and REPENTANCE in a direct relationship with God echoes traditional Protestant teachings. The LDS position "is not a convenient eclecticism, but a repossession [through the Restoration] of a New Testament understanding that reconciles Paul and James" (Madsen, p. 175).

The Church's emphasis on personal responsibility and the need for self-disciplined obedience may seem to de-emphasize the role of Christ's grace; however, for Latter-day Saints, obedience is but one blade of the scissors. All of LDS theology also reflects the major premise of the Book of Mormon that without grace there is no salvation: "For we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do" (2 Ne. 25:23). The source of this grace is the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ: "Mercy cometh because of the atonement" (Alma 42:23).

The teachings of Christian theology since the Middle Ages are rooted in the belief that, primarily because of the effects of the Fall and original sin, humankind has an inherently evil nature. In both the Catholic and the Protestant traditions, only the grace of God can overcome this natural evil. Various Christian writers have disputed the extent to which the bestowal of grace completely overcomes man's dark nature. In the fifth century,