

THE ARTICLES OF FAITH

INTRODUCTION

HISTORY

In early 1842 at the solicitation of John Wentworth, the editor of the *Chicago Democrat*, Joseph Smith composed a “sketch of the rise, progress, persecution, and faith of the Latter-Day Saints.” Although this sketch went unpublished by Wentworth, it did see the light of day on March 1, 1842, in the pages of the *Times and Seasons*. Titled “Church History” at the time of its first appearance in print, this composition has been enshrined in Latter-day Saint historical consciousness and vernacular as the Wentworth Letter after the name of its immediate recipient. In fact, though, Wentworth had requested a statement from Joseph not for himself but for his friend, the Boston lawyer George Barstow, who was then preparing a history of the state of New Hampshire. Sensing an opportune time to capitalize on the growing national interest in the Church, the Prophet composed this history with the express desire that it be published “ungarnished, and without misrepresentation” for the general reading public.

In this history, Joseph narrated his early life; provided one of the few firsthand accounts of his First Vision, the appearance of Moroni, and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon; and retold the history of the Church from its founding on April 6, 1830, to its rise and progress up to the point of the history’s composition (with special emphasis on the persecution the Saints had suffered in Missouri). After providing this history and extolling the growing missionary work of the Church, the Prophet concluded with thirteen declarations of faith, twelve of which began with “We believe.” It was in this context that Joseph provided the first articulation of what are now known as the Articles of Faith.

This was not, however, the first time Latter-day Saints had attempted to provide a synopsis of their beliefs in a way similar to the 1842 Articles of

Faith. In 1834, Oliver Cowdery, then acting as editor of *The Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, published a catalog of some of the Church's foundational doctrines that each began with the declaration "We believe." These points touched on the Saints' belief in the Godhead, continuing revelation, religious liberty, and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. In 1840, Apostles (and brothers) Parley and Orson Pratt both published their own formulations of the essentials of Latter-day Saint doctrine. Orson Pratt's tract *A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions*, in which his version appeared, was so influential, in fact, that Joseph himself appropriated some of its language (sometimes verbatim) when composing "Church History" and the Articles of Faith.

The Articles of Faith have been present in every major edition of the Pearl of Great Price since the 1851 first edition. They were first left unnamed, only being called "Articles of our Faith" in the 1878 Salt Lake edition prepared by Orson Pratt. The name they are known by today ("The Articles of Faith of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints") was first given to them in the 1902 edition prepared by James E. Talmage. Ironically, despite Joseph's desire that the articles not be separated from the rest of the "Church History" editorial, they have always appeared in the Pearl of Great Price separated from the historical content in which the Prophet couched them, which has never enjoyed the same canonical status.

STRUCTURE

The Articles of Faith are a succession of short, declarative statements of faith. Although authored by Joseph Smith, they are made with first-person plural pronouns, thereby signaling their significance for the Latter-day Saints as a faith community. As mentioned, they were originally composed to be the culmination of a longer historical narrative, but as encountered by most Latter-day Saints today they are isolated from this historical and narrative context. Although they may appear random at first glance, the Articles of Faith in fact can be classified into distinct, purposeful theological categories. The first and second articles elucidate the Latter-day Saint view of the nature of God and humanity, thus satisfying what is arguably the most important metaphysical groundwork that must be laid in any discussion of theology. The third and fourth articles touch on soteriology, or the theology of salvation. The fifth, sixth, and seventh articles overview the ecclesiastical structure of the Church of Jesus Christ and the spiritual gifts that accompany the offices of the Church. The eighth and ninth articles declare the nature of the canon and ongoing revelation. The tenth article touches on eschatology, or the theology of the culmination of the earth's and humanity's destined future. And the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth articles encapsulate matters of practical living and morality.

In addition to being logically ordered, the Articles of Faith are also progressive in nature in that they build upon each other in a progressive unfolding of their full significance. For example, the third article affirms that humanity can only be saved by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the fourth article then expounds on what these laws and ordinances are. The fifth article clarifies that proper ordination to ecclesiastical office comes by prophecy and the laying on of hands by one in authority, then the sixth explains what those offices are, and the seventh names the spiritual gifts that operate in those offices. The eighth article affirms the canonical authority of the scriptural record, while the ninth adds to it by explaining that the canon remains open because revelation continues in the Church of Jesus Christ. The articles' progressive nature and logical ordering invites readers to ponder on their relationship to each other and their significance within this broader schema.

Joseph Smith's signature has appeared at the end of the Articles of Faith since they were first published in 1842 and in each edition of the Pearl of Great Price since 1851. This fulfills the practical need of identifying the author and reinforces their prophetic weight and authority.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR LATTER-DAY SAINTS

Whether the Nicene Creed of the fourth century AD or the Westminster Confession of the seventeenth, Latter-day Saints are characteristically suspicious of the classical Christian creeds that, in their view, impose restrictive theological boundaries that stifle the unfolding process of revelation and restoration. In a discourse delivered on October 15, 1843, Joseph Smith, drawing from the language of Job 38:11, voiced his frustration with creeds that “set up stakes and say ‘hitherto shalt thou come, and no further.’” But the Articles of Faith, as some have pointed out, can arguably be viewed as a set of de facto creeds for the Latter-day Saints. (The very word *creed* comes from the Latin *credo*, meaning “I believe.”) This apparent paradox highlights the tension inherent between the efforts of Latter-day Saints beginning with Joseph Smith to codify and systematize their theology on the one hand and the expansive, progressive nature of revelation in the Church of Jesus Christ on the other.

The solution to this paradox would be, it seems, to view the Articles of Faith not as strict demarcations of religious identity to which the faithful must strictly adhere but rather as an executive summary of just some of the fundamental doctrines underpinning the Restoration. This, indeed, is how Joseph Smith treated them in the context of his letter to John Wentworth and is how Latter-day Saints have typically approached them. That the Articles of Faith were likely not intended to function in the same way as the classical Christian creeds can further be seen in what they leave out. Absent from

these articles is any mention of the premortal life, the three degrees of glory, posthumous salvation for the dead, eternal marriage, the doctrine of exaltation, and humanity's potential to become like God. Surely these and other points of Latter-day Saint doctrine not mentioned in the articles are not unimportant. But they were also not included in the Articles of Faith precisely because the Prophet did not intend the articles to be exhaustive, authoritative mandates of everything those wishing to call themselves Latter-day Saints must unhesitatingly believe. The Articles of Faith thus represent the ground floor of Latter-day Saint theology, not the ceiling.

Since their canonization in 1880, the Articles of Faith have served as an important springboard for Latter-day Saint theological exposition. In 1899 James E. Talmage, before his call to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in 1911, published an influential treatise that used the articles as his reference point in systematizing the core doctrines of the Church. This volume—titled, appropriately, *The Articles of Faith*—proved so influential that it has been translated into multiple languages and remains in print after over a century. Appearing the same year as his death in 1985, the book *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* by Elder Bruce R. McConkie of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles sought, like Talmage's earlier work, to illuminate and explore the theological richness of the Restoration by using the Articles of Faith as its conceptual framework.

While providing authors with abundant material for deep theological explication, the Articles of Faith have also proven to be useful pedagogical tools for instructing children, youth, and new converts in the foundational tenets of the Church. On any given Sunday in any given Church building around the world, members can be seen committing the articles to memory in Sunday School and quorum meetings, singing them in Primary, and reciting them in talks and lessons. Missionaries, too, are encouraged to use the articles in proselytizing efforts as a quick, accessible way to clarify the basic principles of the gospel. In this way they are following in the footsteps of Joseph Smith, who in 1842 used a valuable missionary opportunity to formulate these articles of faith that are cherished by Saints across the globe nearly two centuries later.

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ABBREVIATIONS

The abbreviated designations for the Articles of Faith used in this study edition correlate to content on the Joseph Smith Papers Project website.

T&S = *Times and Seasons*, “Church History,” 1 March 1842.