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Reclaiming the “Primary Question”: A New Beginning for Joseph Smith’s First Vision

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Abstract: The First Vision as a narrative has long been in flux. Scholars have documented a cultural recovery of Joseph Smith’s First Vision by the Church in the twentieth century. This revival came about through a reemphasis on the First Vision in the wake of the Reed Smoot hearings. It was also fostered by a need to defend the Church’s origin story during the development of a “new Mormon history” and by the onset of the information age. The twenty-first century has likewise seen a raising of the stakes with regard to Joseph Smith’s story. This renaissance has led to an intentional focus on the multiple accounts of the First Vision as exemplified in a new Gospel Topics essay, a Foundations of the Restoration institute course, worldwide devotionals in which General Authorities have discussed the various accounts, a short film depicting Smith’s experience as compiled from the multiple accounts, and a foregrounding of the Sacred Grove as part of the two hundredth anniversary of Smith’s theophany. A significant cultural turn resulting from these institutional strides is that attention has shifted away from interpreting the First Vision primarily as the validation of a “one true church” doctrine and toward emphasizing it as a witness of Jesus Christ’s universal love and forgiveness. To chart this new beginning, I surveyed seventy-six Seminaries and Institutes educators to document how the twenty-first-century developments mentioned above have impacted the way they frame and teach the First Vision. They overwhelmingly reported feeling increased confidence and capacity in doing so. Additionally, they described a much more nuanced understanding of why Smith went into the grove in the first place. The resulting shift in perspective—approaching the First Vision inclusively instead of defensively—will likely have a significant impact on Church culture and education in the years to come.



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Reclaiming the “Primary Question”

A New Beginning for Joseph Smith’s First Vision

William G. Perez

Preparing for the Bicentennial

In October 2019, Russell M. Nelson, President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, reminded Church members that “in the springtime of the year 2020, it will be exactly 200 years since Joseph Smith experienced the theophany that we now know as the First Vision. God the Father and His Beloved Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to Joseph, a 14-year-old youth. That event marked the onset of the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ in its fulness, precisely as foretold in the Holy Bible.”¹ President Nelson then designated 2020 as a bicentennial year and invited listeners to prepare for a memorable commemoration. Among his suggestions for preparation was “reading afresh Joseph Smith’s account of the First Vision as recorded in the Pearl of Great Price.”² His remarks and the subsequent bicentennial celebration evidence the First Vision’s status as a founding narrative and key collective memory for Latter-day Saints. While the Pearl of Great Price remains the traditional place to brush up on Smith’s account, the twenty-first-century Church’s approach to his historical record has expanded. Despite the existence of an official, canonized version of the story, speaking or teaching about Joseph Smith’s experience without significantly referencing its multiple accounts has become virtually impossible.

In response to their prophet’s invitation, two institute teachers, employees of the Church’s Seminaries and Institutes of Religion system,

1. Russell M. Nelson, “Closing Remarks,” *Ensign* 49, no. 11 (November 2019): 122.

2. Nelson, “Closing Remarks,” 122.

developed a new course for young adults titled “Preparing for the Bicentennial.” Joseph Smith’s First Vision was a prominent part of their curriculum. At the conclusion of the semester, the group of around 150 students was rewarded with a field trip to the Church History Museum, where a docent personally met with them. One of the teachers described his experience as follows:

One of the coolest things for me was to walk into that Church History Museum. . . . They had a room that was reserved for our group, . . . and he [the docent] goes, “How many of you are aware that there are multiple accounts of the First Vision?” And he kind of takes a deep breath like, “I’m going to drop a bomb on you, and I want to be really careful.” All my students raised their hand. I was like, “Yeah!” . . . And he goes, “What? Wait, no, no, *multiple* accounts of the First Vision.” And I’m like, “We’ve just been teaching this.” . . . And I felt a little bad for him, because . . . I was taking steam out of whatever he was going to teach for the first 45 minutes.³

This teacher later reflected,

I’m glad that the message of a boy-prophet’s visitation and charge from Deity has remained the message of curriculum and of teachers (this teacher at least) throughout my career. The “shift” from only teaching (like early curriculum mostly brought forward) that Joseph went into a grove of trees to “find out which church was true,” to messages like . . . forgiveness of his sins, nine accounts that differ, the reality of different data from those accounts—such as how old he was or audience for the account, etc. . . . has been thrilling to watch.⁴

The religious educators in the Seminaries and Institutes program have had not only front-row access to watching this shift but also opportunities to help bring it about.

The First Vision as a narrative has long been in flux. Scholars have documented a cultural recovery of Joseph Smith’s First Vision by the Church in the twentieth century. This revival came about through a reemphasis on the First Vision in the wake of the Reed Smoot hearings.⁵ It was also fostered by a need to defend the Church’s origin story during the development of a “new Mormon history” and by the onset of

3. Zoom interview with author, April 24, 2023. Some of the responses and interviews have been lightly edited for readability.

4. Survey by the author, “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision with Students,” 31.

5. See Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

the information age.⁶ The twenty-first century has likewise seen a raising of the stakes with regard to Joseph Smith’s story. This renaissance has led to an intentional focus on the multiple accounts of the First Vision as exemplified in a new Gospel Topics essay, a Foundations of the Restoration institute course, worldwide devotionals in which General Authorities have discussed the various accounts, a short film depicting Smith’s experience as compiled from the multiple accounts, and a foregrounding of the Sacred Grove as part of the two hundredth anniversary of Smith’s theophany. A significant cultural turn resulting from these institutional strides is that attention has shifted *away* from interpreting the First Vision primarily as the validation of a “one true church” doctrine and *toward* emphasizing it as a witness of Jesus Christ’s universal love and forgiveness. To chart this new beginning, I surveyed seventy-six Seminaries and Institutes educators to document how the twenty-first-century developments mentioned above have impacted the way they frame and teach the First Vision.⁷ They overwhelmingly reported feeling increased confidence and capacity in doing so. Additionally, they described a much more nuanced understanding of why Smith went into the grove in the first place. The resulting shift in perspective—approaching the First Vision inclusively instead of defensively—will likely have a significant impact on Church culture and education in the years to come.

A New Memory

To some extent, the assertion that a new narrative has formed around the First Vision—or at least a new interpretation of the old narrative—has been alluded to already by historians Richard Bushman and Steven Harper. It hinges on Joseph Smith’s 1832 account, the first of nine existing first- and secondhand contemporary sources for the First Vision. As a prelude to his theophany, Smith reports feeling the need “to mourn for my own sins and the sins of the world.”⁸ After crying to God for mercy, Smith wrote, “I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying Joseph my son thy sins are forgiven thee.”⁹ This aspect of Smith’s emotional wrestle and

6. See Steven C. Harper, “Raising the Stakes: How Joseph Smith’s First Vision Became All or Nothing,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (2020), 23–58.

7. The author received approval from the Institutional Review Board at Florida State University for this project prior to soliciting and collecting survey responses. Study 00003695 was approved on December 13, 2022.

8. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 2, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed May 5, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/2>.

9. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 3.

the subsequent forgiveness that he received are not mentioned in the canonized account, although they are alluded to in some of the others. During a devotional address at Brigham Young University–Hawaii in November 2016, Richard Bushman briefly recounted the historiography of Joseph Smith’s First Vision and the newfound ability to go “beyond this one familiar account.”¹⁰ Sharing that he was “particularly attracted” to the 1832 account, Bushman recounted its context and contents and offered the following interpretation: “To my way of thinking this account throws a new light on the Restoration. The 1838 account, the traditional one emphasizes the problem of churches; which church is true? The 1832 story brings redemption to the fore—forgiveness and atonement. Even the prophet of the Lord stands before God in need of forgiveness. . . . To me that is what the 1832 account of the First Vision promises us—a God who will forgive us and lift the burden of sin from our backs.”¹¹ Bushman’s remarks manifest an expansion of the traditional way that the First Vision had been approached in Latter-day Saint religious education settings.

This approach first caught my attention in two sentences written by Steven Harper as he highlighted the significance of Bushman’s address. Published in his 2019 book, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins*, and later extended in a 2020 article entitled “Raising the Stakes: How Joseph Smith’s First Vision Became All or Nothing,” Harper noted, “Bushman was offering a new memory of the seminal story. In the twenty-first century, it could be less about feeling embattled and persecuted and debating the nature of the one true church. Attention could shift instead to the universal message of redemption through Christ.”¹² If this was to be a “new memory,” what was the old one? It stemmed from what Patrick Mason has termed a “fortress church”¹³ mentality, one in which truth is constantly under siege and boundaries are essential for survival.

Historians have described the canonized 1838–39 account as being developed during a time of intense persecution mingled with “Smith’s

10. Richard L. Bushman, “What We Can Learn from the First Vision” (address, BYU Center of Religious Studies, Laie, Hawaii, November 15, 2016), <https://speeches.byuh.edu/devotional/what-can-we-learn-from-the-first-vision>.

11. Bushman, “What We Can Learn from the First Vision.”

12. Harper, “Raising the Stakes,” 53. See also Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 251.

13. Patrick Q. Mason, “The Fortress Church,” in *Restoration: God’s Call to the 21st-Century World* (Meridian, Idaho: Faith Matters, 2020), 1–9.

vivid recollection of rejection.”¹⁴ Consistent opposition and imprisonment bubbled over into the need for a “defensive, resolute” memory that would defiantly assert the Church’s truth claims and distinguish it from the other denominations of its day.¹⁵ Ultimately, “this is the version of Smith’s memory that was eventually canonized. Many saints have parts of it memorized. It shapes their identity as a people persecuted for transcending creedal Christianity and accessing God directly.”¹⁶ Furthermore, this stance carried over into the twentieth century, during which, urged on by fundamentalism and attempts to debunk the sacred story, “the line was drawn at Joseph Smith’s first vision, and it remains a battleground over which people fight, negotiating their identities and relationships relative to the restored gospel as they join or leave, fight for or against the faith.”¹⁷ These high stakes, centered on the apostate status of Christendom and on the bringing forth of the one true Church, became the crux of mainline interpretations of the 1838–39 account.

The walls of the fortress Church have in many ways receded in recent decades. One impact of this abatement is an intentional transparency centering on Joseph Smith’s First Vision accounts. In October 2013, the Joseph Smith Papers project made all historical accounts of the First Vision easily accessible on its open-access website. The following month, the Church released an essay attempting to spotlight the accounts and candidly address speculative concerns.¹⁸ In February 2016, Elder M. Russell Ballard, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, addressed Latter-day Saint religious educators and acknowledged the potency of “less known or controversial” topics, including varying accounts of the First Vision.¹⁹ He urged teachers to become proficient at faithfully, thoughtfully, and accurately addressing such concerns, inviting them to master the content of the now-available Gospel Topics essays.

14. Harper, *First Vision*, 18.

15. Harper, *First Vision*, 18.

16. Harper, *First Vision*, 19.

17. Harper, *First Vision*, 187.

18. See “First Vision Accounts,” Gospel Topics Essays, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed September 29, 2023, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/first-vision-accounts>.

19. M. Russell Ballard, “The Opportunities and Responsibilities of CES Teachers in the 21st Century” (address to Church Education System religious educators, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, February 26, 2016, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/broadcasts/article/evening-with-a-general-authority/2016/02/the-opportunities-and-responsibilities-of-ces-teachers-in-the-21st-century>).

Later that year, another General Authority, Richard J. Maynes, spoke to young adults worldwide. In his remarks, he referenced and read from the Church's essay regarding First Vision accounts and from each of the primary accounts of the First Vision. Quoting from them at length, he emphasized that "they together tell Joseph's consistent, harmonious story."²⁰ The surge in awareness and devotional use of the multiple First Vision accounts was compounded by their invigorated inclusion in Church curricula, an innovative official video drawing from each account, and the 2018 release of *Saints*, a new narrative history of the Church. These advancements have aided in the creation of the "new memory" described by Harper and Bushman and have trickled down into Latter-day Saint seminary and institute classrooms across the world.

The "Primary Question"

In gauging the impact of the accentuated accessibility of multiple accounts of the First Vision on religious educators, I expected to chart a mostly positive response and to find evidence of an increasing emphasis on forgiveness and a decreasing overtness in matters of religious exceptionalism. I asked religious educators these questions: How long have you been teaching seminary or institute for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? How has the Church's twenty-first-century emphasis on multiple accounts of the First Vision impacted the way you present and teach the First Vision to your students (if at all)? What principles or doctrines do you feel are most important for students to understand and relate to from your framing and teaching of the First Vision? Have these emphases changed throughout your teaching career? If so, how? Respondents answered anonymously via a Google survey that was disseminated at a grassroots level.

While I generally found what I had anticipated, I was surprised by a deeper shift that I had not detected before. It was a matter of not only the *what* that was being drawn from First Vision accounts but also the *why*. Along these lines, one response that struck me expressed, "I think the emphasis, clarity, and openness of the multiple First Vision accounts has helped me teach Joseph Smith's experience with greater power and richness as I have been able to introduce appropriate or needed additional details from other accounts into the account found in the Pearl of Great

20. Richard J. Maynes, "The Truth Restored" (devotional address, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, May 1, 2016, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/broadcasts/article/worldwide-devotionals/2016/01/the-truth-restored>).

Price. I think more students in this generation appreciate the fact that Joseph’s primary question was about his standing before God.”²¹ I had not yet considered that a key piece of the cultural shift I was attempting to tap into revolved around a different understanding of *why* Joseph Smith decided to pray in the first place. Another respondent wrote,

With the help of these resources, I have come to understand better what Joseph’s primary concern was in his pursuit of answers. More than anything, Joseph wanted to know his standing before God and how he could be saved. This differs in important ways from the question often presented to me by my childhood teachers of “Which church is true?” Joseph’s question was focused on his relationship to God, and by extension, which church was his Church. This is the emphasis I choose to place on my teaching of the First Vision. When I do this, my students seem to have a deeper, richer experience because Joseph’s concern about his standing before God resonates with their own current experiences far more than the question of which church to join (perhaps because a majority of my students have already chosen to accept The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as the Lord’s Church).²²

A fixation on the “Which church is true?” question and the subsequent response was at the forefront of the older, more defensive identity drawn from the canonized account of the First Vision. However, a different primary question—relating to Joseph Smith’s standing before God and his desire for salvation—is more characteristic of a new mode of interpreting the First Vision, one which seemingly “resonates with . . . current experiences far more than the question of which church to join.”²³

While reflecting on this pattern in the survey responses, I decided to listen to *The First Vision: A Joseph Smith Papers Podcast*. Released in early 2020 (the year of the bicentennial), the podcast is a six-part series that explores the history and legacy of Joseph Smith’s First Vision. It was written and hosted by Spencer McBride, a historian and editor on the Joseph Smith Papers team. On a different platform, McBride described the podcast project as not “your grandpa’s Church history.”²⁴ Its aim was to allow listeners to dive into the First Vision through a historian’s eyes, and on

21. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 9. Note that several of the responses have been silently edited for spelling and style for clarity.

22. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 17.

23. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 17.

24. Laura Harris Hales and Spencer W. McBride, “The First Vision with Spencer W. McBride,” February 5, 2020, *Latter-day Saint Perspectives Podcast*, episode 119, podcast, 8:17, <https://ldsperspectives.com/2020/02/05/first-vision-with-spencer-mcbride/>.

brand with the twenty-first-century trend, this included weaving together the multiple accounts of the First Vision. I was led to this resource because it was mentioned by a few of the respondents as extremely helpful (many more mentioned the Joseph Smith Papers project in general). I had not yet thought to include it in my list of developments that contributed to the present interpretive moment. As I made my way through the podcast, I noticed a consistent stressing of a “primary question” that is different from the traditional take. It was almost as if some of the survey respondents had quoted the podcast’s explication verbatim.

In episode 2, Spencer McBride has a conversation with Steven Harper. They address the conventional narrative and place it in the context of another one:

Spencer: So far in this episode, we have talked a lot about answers. Let’s take a moment to talk about questions—specifically, the questions to which Joseph Smith was seeking answers. And in the way that many Latter-day Saints have heard the story, the pressing question for Joseph Smith was, Which of all the churches is true? Which one was the correct church, or the church teaching the correct doctrine of Jesus Christ? And he did ask that question. But there was an important question that preceded it. Joseph wanted to know about salvation. He wondered about the state of his soul, about his standing before God. He wanted to be forgiven for his sins. He wanted to know the path to eternal salvation.

Steve: Joseph’s question is an ultimate question. He’s asking about the most important concerns a person can have, the most eternal ones. He’s not asking, “What church should I join?” like we might choose from a variety of grocery stores or . . . country club options. He’s asking about redemption.

Spencer: And so, Joseph only arrives at the question of which church is true as he seeks the answer to this larger question—as he seeks resolution to these bigger concerns. And, as Steven Harper sees it, this small shift in how we tell the story of the First Vision can help us understand the connection Joseph Smith saw to the restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ and the salvation of God’s children.

Steve: The only reason to know which church is true is to know which one leads me to Christ, which one is His, which one can I find forgiveness in. So, it changes everything. It makes our association with church more than about which doctrines are right. It’s a lot less theological or, at least, it’s much more practical. It’s about my salvation, not just about a theological argument.

Spencer: And that’s the big question that Joseph Smith is seeking: How can I be forgiven of my sins? His question about the state of his soul

prompted the other questions that ultimately led him into a grove of trees to pray. It was only in seeking answers to the pressing questions of his soul that Joseph Smith determined that he must find out which of all the churches was true.²⁵

McBride returns to this point in episode 4. Quoting the 1832 account, he relates, “Jesus told Joseph that his sins were forgiven—‘Joseph, thy sins are forgiven thee’—and urged him to walk in His statutes and keep His commandments. This was a direct answer to Joseph’s primary question. Remember, he had worried about the state of his soul and desired forgiveness of his sins. Now, he had answers. Now, he had forgiveness. Now, he had a profound sense of God’s love for him.”²⁶

The story summoned throughout the podcast is not grounded in the defiantly toned 1838–39 account, where all other creeds are abominable, and their ministers are corrupt. Instead, the entire narrative takes a much warmer tone. As McBride summarizes in the final episode, “Answers to prayer. Spiritual direction. Forgiveness for sins. That seems to bring us back to where it all started for Joseph Smith. A young boy trying to sort through deep questions about his soul, wanting to know and connect with God.”²⁷ In theory, this retelling, less theological and more practical, will resonate deeply with modern-day seekers.

The First Vision: A Joseph Smith Papers Podcast was extremely well received. During its debut week, it ranked in the top twenty-five of all podcasts on iTunes. Steven Harper’s work on the First Vision and memory illustrates how throughout its history, the origin story has had powerful interlocutors who, having selected specific memories from individual and communal recollections, relate them meaningfully to a shared history and then consistently repeat them in a variety of settings. This process eventually creates a stable narrative “in the ongoing process of collective memory consolidation and recursion, especially between

25. Spencer W. McBride and Steven C. Harper, “‘What Was to Be Done’ (The First Vision Podcast, Episode 2): Transcript,” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 29, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/articles/the-first-vision-podcast-episode-2-transcript?highlight=podcast>.

26. Spencer W. McBride, “‘A Pillar of Light’ (The First Vision Podcast, Episode 4): Transcript,” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 29, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/articles/the-first-vision-podcast-episode-4-transcript?highlight=podcast>.

27. Spencer W. McBride, Jenny Lund, Mark Staker, and LeGrand Curtis Jr., “‘I Had Seen a Vision’ (The First Vision Podcast, Episode 6): Transcript,” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 29, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/articles/the-first-vision-podcast-episode-6-transcript?highlight=podcast>.

generations.”²⁸ Speaking to a newer generation, *The First Vision: A Joseph Smith Papers Podcast* and the scholars behind it are a new wave of influential selectors, relators, and repeaters, “offering a new memory of the seminal story.”²⁹ And that new memory includes the reclamation of Joseph Smith’s primary question.

Confidence, Revelation, and Redemption

If not selectors of memory themselves, the religious educators of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are certainly able relators and repeaters, allowing for an alternative application of the First Vision to take root among the rising generation. An army of paid professionals who also train volunteer teachers throughout the globe,³⁰ Seminaries and Institutes personnel are on the front lines of the “war of words, and tumult of opinions”³¹ about Joseph Smith’s First Vision. Of the seventy-six respondents, ten reported that the twenty-first-century resources and emphases on multiple First Vision accounts had minimal to no impact on their teaching. As one teacher succinctly (and maybe rather defensively) stated, “Truth is truth no impact at all.”³² Another expressed frustration in recounting, “We teach, kids still search for answers on the W[orld] W[ide] Web.”³³ Of the ten teachers reporting minimal or

28. Harper, *First Vision*, 129.

29. Harper, *First Vision*, 251.

30. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints encourages high-school students to attend an early-morning or release-time seminary class. It encourages adults ages eighteen to thirty to enroll in an institute course. Its religious education offerings cover the Latter-day Saint standard scriptures as well as a variety of other topics such as Church history and doctrines. Although the number of volunteer teachers is far greater, a Church General Authority shared that there were a total of 2,878 full-time professionals employed by Seminaries and Institutes of Religion (S&I) in 2017. Of that number, 1,849 of them were employed in the United States, and 1,029 of them were employed outside of the United States in 128 countries. The number of S&I employees who work as teachers is presumably lower than 2,878, accounting for administrative and other roles. See Gerrit W. Gong, “And Jesus Said unto Them: I Am the Bread of Life” (address to Church Education System religious educators, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, February 17, 2017, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/evening-with-ga-elder-gerrit-w-gong/2017/02/and-jesus-said-unto-them-i-am-the-bread-of-life?lang=eng>).

31. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 2, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed May 5, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-june-1839-circa-1841-draft-2/2?p=2>.

32. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 8.

33. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 6.

no impact, one had been employed with Seminaries and Institutes for seven years, and another for four months, possibly making them imperious to the longer-term shift. Although the lines are sometimes blurry, the remaining respondents were separated into those who reported some impact on their teaching (seventeen respondents) and those who reported significant impact (forty-nine respondents). Their time of employment with Seminaries and Institutes ranged from one year to forty years.³⁴

Two themes from the survey responses came to the fore. The first was an increased confidence in understanding the multiple accounts of the First Vision and being able to teach students about them. Second was a heightened emphasis on personal applications of the First Vision in terms of communing with God and receiving divine love and forgiveness. The latter speaks to a shift away from interpreting the First Vision primarily as the validation of a “one true church” doctrine and toward emphasizing it as a witness of Jesus Christ’s universal love and forgiveness. This shift is not necessarily at the expense of the implications of exclusivity drawn from the First Vision. Nor does it serve as a complete substitute. However, respondents did not mention the traditional line of interpretation nearly as often as they did others.

A final note in terms of authenticity—describing seminary and institute teachers as relators and repeaters in this ongoing shift is not to label them automatons, stripped of individual agency in the process. As one respondent explained, “As I have grown and personally studied these accounts over and over again [the principles I choose to emphasize when I teach the First Vision] have changed because I have changed and grown as a person because of personal life experiences.”³⁵ Rather than simply repeating the latest party line, these teachers have made a sincere emotional investment. They have dived into the First Vision accounts and resources and made them their own. Moreover, having been repeatedly charged with preserving doctrinal purity in religious instruction, the fact that so many of these educators are embracing this new mode of interpretation speaks to its perceived soundness.³⁶

34. Of the seventy-six S&I employees surveyed, sixteen have been employed with S&I for zero to ten years, twenty-one have been employed with S&I for eleven to nineteen years, and thirty-nine have been employed with S&I for more than twenty years.

35. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 28.

36. For example, in the most recent broadcast geared toward Latter-day Saint religious educators worldwide, Elder Neil L. Andersen of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles counseled teachers to keep “the Lord’s doctrine pure and understandable, [being] careful

The following are samples of the survey responses that illustrate the themes of increased confidence and personal applications of the First Vision (revelation and redemption). Although many respondents mentioned all of the above and more, each response included below will be from a different respondent, allowing for more of them to have a voice and to illustrate how prevalent these emphases are.

Confidence

All of these emphases and resources have helped me tremendously to teach the First Vision. I feel that before all of this came out, . . . if I brought up the other accounts that I was bringing up issues or challenges that the students didn't need to deal with. Wow, was I wrong! . . . The emphasis has given me great confidence to teach all accounts on the same level without elevating just the Pearl of Great Price account that has been canonized. Before I felt I should only have that one elevated, but now I can teach all of them on the same level without worry or hesitation in doing so.³⁷

I have been influenced greatly. I am tremendously grateful for the recent emphasis on multiple accounts. It's almost like we are able to take an arrow out of the quiver of the adversary when we teach the First Vision proactively, utilizing multiple primary and secondary accounts.³⁸

Without the Multiple First Vision Accounts Gospel Topic Essay, I would not [have] felt safe or authorized to teach principles that differ from the 1838 account. I am tremendously grateful for the emergence of this essay and the JS Papers Project and Podcast.³⁹

My approach to teaching the First Vision has evolved over the last decade of teaching in what I feel are significant ways. I have emphasized the multiple accounts of the First Vision and encouraged students to study the different primary accounts. Early in my career it felt like a less productive use of time to go to various accounts instead of focusing on the 1838 account in the scriptures that everyone was familiar with. . . . I would not say that my shift has been compelled by any single

to stay within the bounds God has established, avoiding the errors that come through speculation and non-doctrinal personal ideas." Neil L. Andersen, "The Power of Jesus Christ and Pure Doctrine" (address, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, June 11, 2023, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/language-record-ing/2023/06/12andersen>).

37. "Sharing Joseph Smith's First Vision," 9.

38. "Sharing Joseph Smith's First Vision," 7.

39. "Sharing Joseph Smith's First Vision," 20.

twenty-first century emphasis, however my personal study of the multiple accounts on the Joseph Smith Papers website as well as the Gospel Topic essay on the subject, and teaching the cornerstone course on Foundations of the Restoration have been impactful.⁴⁰

The essay and the short film have impacted the way I teach and present the First Vision to my students the most. First of all, having the full accounts available online has allowed me to study them and appreciate the First Vision more. I am able to bring up the fact that there are multiple accounts without fear that my students may bring up something I haven’t studied in depth already. I have been able to answer their questions by having them read directly from the accounts themselves. I have been able to help students see the need for the different accounts and learn more about how their Heavenly Father feels about each of them because of things said in each account especially the [1832] account. . . . I only wish there were more accounts we could learn from!⁴¹

I would say that because the resources for teaching the First Vision have improved and have been expanded, my ability to teach the First Vision has also improved and expanded. I do all that I can to point my students to the wealth of resources so they can learn for themselves, deepen their conversion to the Savior, and find the spiritually relevant principles to their lives.⁴²

Early in my career, I *taught* the First Vision to my students. As I have become more skilled in my profession and in my understanding of the content, I teach my students *using* the First Vision.⁴³

Revelation

We can learn—by revelation—for ourselves. . . . My teaching has changed over the years. I emphasize more the example of Joseph Smith to receive revelation, which is the only way we can know if the First Vision is real.⁴⁴

The principles and doctrines I feel are most important for students to understand and relate to are God speaks today through personal revelation and prophets, we can turn to God with our questions, and it can be difficult and even [feel] weird when we reach out and connect with God.⁴⁵

40. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 8.

41. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 10.

42. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 15.

43. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 29, emphasis added.

44. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 26.

45. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 28.

President Nelson’s talk about how Heavenly Father introduces the Son has changed how I teach the First Vision. Discussing “Hear Him” and receiving revelation. Focusing on asking questions and how the Lord will answer—these have become recent changes.⁴⁶

The principles of acquiring spiritual knowledge are all taught in the First Vision. With our directive and emphasis in teaching these principles, Joseph Smith becomes a model for finding answers. This is also evident in President Nelson’s talk on revelation as he used Joseph Smith as an example. While I taught some of these principles early on, the training we have received for the principles of acquiring spiritual knowledge makes the [teaching] of the First Vision a great opportunity to teach these principles.⁴⁷

[The principles and doctrines I feel are most important for students to understand and relate to from my framing and teaching of the First Vision are] that God knows you personally and is eager to answer your prayers. That you can receive forgiveness from your sins and find joy in Jesus Christ. That questions are good and seeking is an important part of conversion. . . . I feel like I have put greater emphasis on the idea that questions are good in most recent years. I never discouraged questions in the past, but I feel like generally as a Church, we have [more recently] put greater emphasis in helping our students become seekers rather than doubters.⁴⁸

Redemption

What I have changed in my teaching since the emphasis on multiple First Vision accounts is from the 1835⁴⁹ account. I love to point out to my students Joseph’s desire to be forgiven of his sins and [to] make connections to various stories in scripture and from modern times [about] how repentance often leads to revelation.⁵⁰

46. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 30.

47. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 30.

48. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 24.

49. It is likely that this respondent meant to reference the 1832 account instead of the 1835 account. However, the 1835 account does mention Joseph Smith receiving forgiveness. See “Journal, 1835–1836,” 24, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed May 5, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/25>. Joseph’s desire to be forgiven of his sins is more fully captured in the 1832 account.

50. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 23.

[The twenty-first-century emphasis on multiple accounts of the First Vision has] completely changed the way I present it. I use the four first-hand accounts each time I present the First Vision.⁵¹

From the 1832 account, I focus on the love and mercy the Savior shows to Joseph in forgiving his sins (Joseph's main purpose for going to the grove). This emphasis is highlighted in the 1832 account and is in large part lost if the Vision is presented without this account.⁵²

These multiple accounts have also guided my own presentation and teaching as Joseph seeking forgiveness and support as much as seeking truth and revelation for the restored Church. It has given all of us a greater appreciation for God's love for all his children in this gift that is the Restoration, not just a restored Church, but restored truths that point us more fully to his Son, Jesus Christ!⁵³

I include information from all the accounts each time I teach the First Vision. I focus on Joseph's desire to receive forgiveness of sins.⁵⁴

Most important [principle and doctrine for students to understand and relate to] is Joseph's desire to be forgiven of sins, and to receive that confirmation for himself. Second would be the immense faith that Joseph showed in getting his answer. Third would be a clear picture of how the Great Apostasy affected people in that era (even until today). Fourth would be the true nature of God as resurrected personages of light. These emphases have changed during my teaching career. I have shied away from teaching which church is true or saying that other sects have a "form of godliness but deny the power thereof" (JS-H 1:19).⁵⁵

For my teaching the most important idea that has come about from the emphases of the First Vision has been the understanding that Joseph Smith was searching for the true Church because he was concerned for the salvation of his soul. It was a very personal yearning of his heart, not a curiosity for truth. I think in years past I have focused more on the religious confusion of Joseph's day that he was experiencing and his heartfelt quest to find God's true Church, but it has [been] taken to another deeper level to see his desire to find the true Church for his own salvation. He didn't just want to know where to go—he wanted to know where to go to find salvation and redemption.⁵⁶

51. "Sharing Joseph Smith's First Vision," 9.

52. "Sharing Joseph Smith's First Vision," 22.

53. "Sharing Joseph Smith's First Vision," 12.

54. "Sharing Joseph Smith's First Vision," 6.

55. "Sharing Joseph Smith's First Vision," 18.

56. "Sharing Joseph Smith's First Vision," 21.

I have emphasized various accounts of Joseph’s First Vision much more to my students. I make them all aware of where they are on the Gospel Library app. In particular I place additional focus on Joseph seeking for forgiveness of his sins and the Savior’s response to this in the earlier accounts. It helps the students relate to Joseph even more.⁵⁷

I feel it is so important for students to understand that one of the reasons Joseph was so intent on finding out which church was true was because he wanted to know who could teach him the correct way to receive forgiveness for his sins. He desired to experience the Atonement of Jesus Christ and his grace. This was one of the driving forces in his desire to know truth. I have emphasized this more over the years as the Church has made access to his First Vision accounts so readily available.⁵⁸

A Twenty-First-Century Approach

The twenty-first century is ushering in a new beginning for Joseph Smith’s First Vision.⁵⁹ A wealth of digestible resources and an emphasis on incorporating all known versions of the experience are helping to create a new memory, a narrative that is less abrasive to the current generation than traditional interpretations. In many ways it seems that this broader retelling feels more relatable to modern-day consumers of the story. One teacher reflected on the appeal of approaching the First Vision from a different vantage point:

My teaching focus has shifted dramatically. In my teenage and missionary and post-missionary years, I tended to learn (and teach) the First Vision story from a standpoint of answering “With so many good churches claiming to have the truth, which church is true?” In the twenty-first century, I started to realize I was approaching the First Vision story with an attempt to answer a question very few seem to be asking. Instead of asking “Which church is true?” more seem to be

57. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 9.

58. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 22.

59. A recent example of this expanded paradigm can be seen in the way President M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles described Joseph Smith’s primary motivations for entering the Sacred Grove in two general conference addresses—one delivered in April 1998, and one delivered in October 2023. In 1998, he said, “One of the most extraordinary events in the history of mankind occurred on a spring day in 1820 when Joseph Smith Jr. went into a grove of trees near his home to ask God for direction, light, and truth.” “Marvelous are the Revelations of the Lord,” *Ensign* 28, no. 4 (May 1998): 31. In 2023, President Ballard reflected, “We know who God is; we know who the Savior is because we have Joseph, who went into a grove of trees as a boy, seeking forgiveness for his sins.” “Praise to the Man,” *Liahona* 47, no. 11 (November 2023): 74

asking “Why do I even need a church?” As a result, I tend to come at the First Vision with an emphasis on “how can I discover the truth for myself when so many divergent opinions exist?”, “what can I learn about adversity that arises when I want to connect with God?”, “what can I learn about the Father and the Son from their interaction with Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove?”, “what important truths were taught in the Sacred Grove through the visit of the Father and the Son?”, etc. In many ways, I feel like these twenty-first century approaches have invited the Spirit more strongly.⁶⁰

As a new generation of Latter-day Saints and potential Church members engage with the event that “marked the onset of the Restoration,”⁶¹ altering the primary question has expanded the pool of relevant answers.

Interestingly, the 1832 account of the First Vision, which has seen such preferential resurgence, was initially written off and then mostly unremembered.⁶² Its tone and approach, which are becoming so meaningful for Latter-day Saints today, reflect a traditional style of Methodist conversion testimonial that became “ultimately unsatisfying” to Smith himself.⁶³ While it incorporated language that would have been familiar to its contemporary audience, the 1832 account did not end up meeting the needs of a persecuted church seeking to establish a unique identity. It essentially disappeared until 1965. As circumstances have changed both for the Church of Jesus Christ and for society in general, could it be that the version of the origin story that seemed so impractical in the nineteenth century is now a godsend in the twenty-first?

While the canonized account of the First Vision contributed to a consistent interpretive lens, the novel diversity of First Vision accounts has augmented the implications of Smith’s theophany. Newfound ways of approaching the narrative are resulting in a shift from a more defensive, or exclusive, depiction of the founding experience to a broader, or more inclusive, witness of divine communication and forgiveness. The

60. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 22.

61. Nelson, “Closing Remarks,” 122.

62. Harper writes that “in light of [Joseph Smith’s] later memories of the same event, his 1832 autobiography is best understood as a conflicted consolidation—an unsuccessful attempt to reconcile his experience with a socially safe identity. . . . For these or other reasons, the 1832 memory did not shape the saints’ story.” Harper, *First Vision*, 27. There have also been allegations of an intentional suppression of the 1832 source by Joseph Fielding Smith in an attempt to avoid presenting seemingly contradictory accounts of the First Vision. See Harper, *First Vision*, 201–2, 252–53; and Stan Larson, “Another Look at Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” *Dialogue* 47, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 37–62.

63. Harper, *First Vision*, 26.

trending paradigm will influence identity creation, proselytizing efforts, and historical interpretation from Church headquarters down to small seminary classrooms. Larger data sets—including Seminaries and Institutes students—will be needed to continue to track the prevalence and permanence of these shifts. Despite the ever-evolving reception history of Joseph Smith's First Vision, one thing remains unchanging: what individuals (and the global Church) choose to emphasize from the accounts directly determines how they relate to and share the story. As the present-day generation stakes its claim on the collective hallowed history, their ensuing redirection of the narrative's major takeaways will extend the shelf life of the First Vision well into the twenty-first century.

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