

Doctrine and Covenants/Church History

Lesson #1

By Ted Gibbons

INTRODUCTION TO THE DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS AND CHURCH HISTORY

Introductory Material; D&C 1

INTRODUCTION: When Joseph Smith announced that the heavens were again opened and that the famine of Amos 8:11-12 had come to a sudden and permanent end, many of the Christians of the United States were offended. Centuries of sectarianism and parental traditions had convinced them that divine communication with God's children had come to a sudden and permanent end with the last chapter of the Bible.

But Joseph not only had the temerity to speak of divine communication to a world that had rejected the possibility, but then to write such communications for his followers and to make them available for the world to examine and attack. Among those written collections is the Doctrine and Covenants, a selection of revelations given to the Prophet Joseph Smith and a few others.

Do you not have the sense of what a miracle it is that we have this book of modern revelations, and that our Father has not only called us to His holy work, but has given us the manual of instructions for how to conduct his work in this day?

Consider these words:

*OLD _____

*NEW _____

*ANOTHER _____

*OUR _____

What word completes each two word phrase above? The word is "*Testament.*" And in a very real sense the Doctrine and Covenants is "Our Testament."

“I consider that the Doctrine and Covenants, our testament, contains a code of the most solemn, the most godlike proclamations ever made to the human family” (Elder Wilford Woodruff, J.D., Vol. 22, p. 147).

There are eternal lessons to be learned from every chapter, nearly every verse of scripture. But these revelations are to us and for us and about us. They really are “our testament” of Jesus Christ and His involvement with us.

As we begin this study, you ought to be aware of a few organizational concepts. First, the lesson outline for the D&C and Church History, is not chronological. It does not examine the sections of the D&C, nor does it discuss the events of Church History in precisely the order in which they appear in the scriptures and our histories. The lessons this year are thematic; they examine concepts and doctrines as they have been taught and applied during all the years since the restoration. Thus, for example, the lesson on the gathering will speak of Kirtland and Missouri and Nauvoo and Salt Lake and the present-day gathering to the stakes of Zion.

Therefore the reading blocks will not be as well-defined as they have been in previous years. However, as a service to yourself, you should plan to read every word of this book during the coming year. If all you learn from the Doctrine and Covenants is what you hear in your Sunday School class, and you neglect your personal study of the scriptures and the prophets, you will have missed the opportunity to examine a treasure that was determined by earlier church leaders to be “of more worth than the riches of the whole earth.” (D&C Explanatory Introduction, paragraph 8)

1. THE REVELATIONS OF THE DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF OUR DAY.

(Explanatory Introduction)

Speaking of the nature of this treasure, we are told in the Explanatory Introduction that the book is a collection of divine revelations and inspired declarations, which include

“messages, warnings, and exhortations ... for the benefit of all mankind, and

contain an invitation to all people everywhere to hear the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ, speaking to them for their temporal well-being and their everlasting salvation.”

The introduction also observes that

“the Doctrine and Covenants is unique because it is not a translation of an ancient document, but is of modern origin. . . . In the revelations one hears the tender but firm voice of the Lord Jesus Christ” (paragraph 3).

Read the sixth paragraph of the Introduction. Reflect on the experiences that caused Joseph and others to reach out into the heavens for help and direction, and recognize that as the heavens were opened for Joseph and the Church, so they will be opened for us. These revelations and our own that come as we ponder and pray and study will guide us directly and precisely back to the presence of our Father and His Son.

2. THE LORD AUTHORED THE PREFACE TO THE DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS

(D&C 1)

Perhaps there is some significance in the words that begin each of our Standard Works. The first word of the Book of Mormon is “I”; the first word of the Pearl of Great Price is “The”; the first word of the Bible is “In”; but the first word of the Doctrine and Covenants is “Hearken.”

Reflect on this for a minute or two. If the phone rang and you found the president of the Church or your nation or some other famous dignitary on the other end, would you need him or her to invite or command you to listen? When someone we revere or admire wants to speak to us, we generally listen without being commanded. Yet in the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord directs us to listen—to hearken—74 times. Other words such as ‘behold,’ ‘listen,’ ‘give ear,’ and ‘hear’ appear hundreds of times as well. D&C 63:1 is most interesting in this context:

“Hearken, O ye people, and open your hearts and give ear from afar; and

listen, you that call yourselves the people of the Lord, and hear the word of the Lord and His will concerning you.”

Five times in a single paragraph the Lord tells us to pay attention: hearken, open your hearts, give ear, listen, and hear. Is this really necessary? Evidently. Something seems to happen when we read His words rather than hearing them with our physical ears. Our willingness to allow His words to make a difference in our lives may be diminished by the fact that these words are in a book. I hope that will never be true of us. Let us etch the first word of this book—hearken—in our minds and inscribe it in our hearts.

The Lord designated D&C 1 as “my preface unto the book of my commandments” (D&C 1:6). And he began it with the word “Hearken.” I have written the prefaces and introductions to a number of books, my own and those of others. I have read hundreds of books with prefaces authored by men and women of renown. But no other book in existence has an preface authored by the Lord Himself.

“Section 1 of the Doctrine and Covenants is the Lord’s preface to the book. The Doctrine and Covenants is the only book in the world that has a preface written by the Lord Himself. In that preface He declares to the world that His voice is unto all men (see D&C 1:2), that the coming of the Lord is nigh (see D&C 1:12), and that the truths found in the Doctrine and Covenants will all be fulfilled (see D&C 1:37–38)” (Pres. Ezra Taft Benson, *Ensign*, Nov. 1986, p. 79).

The revelation in D&C 1 was given at a meeting in November of 1831, when church members met to consider the publication of the revelations received by Joseph Smith. The Lord revealed his will in this matter, and then dictated this preface and directed that it be inserted at the beginning of the record. Let me suggest a few things in this section to which we ought to “hearken”

In D&C 1:1,2: the Lord declares,

“Hearken, o ye people of my church . . .Hearken ye people from afar . . .the voice of the Lord is unto all men, and there is none to escape . . .”

He concludes the preface by saying:

“Search these commandments, for they are true and faithful, and the prophecies and promises which are in them shall all be fulfilled. What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself; and though the heavens and the earth pass away, my word shall not pass away, but shall all be fulfilled . . .” (D&C 1:37,38)

That message is clear enough for anyone, and direct enough that those of us who believe that this book is His voice and these words are the manifestation of His will are left without any excuse. We must search the commandments and then we must hearken to them.

The preface is also a written document of authority—a divine commission to the Lord’s “disciples, whom [he has] chosen in these last days.” (D&C 1:4) For he says that D&C 1 is not only His preface, but His “authority and the authority of [His] servants . . .” (D&C 1:6).

“And verily I say unto you, that they who go forth, bearing these tidings unto the inhabitants of the earth, to them is power given to seal both on earth and in heaven, the unbelieving and rebellious . . .” (D&C 1:8).

The message is important because of things that will surely happen:

1. (D&C 1:10) The Lord will come and recompense everybody according to his work.
2. (D&C 1:13) The anger of the Lord is kindled. His sword will fall.
3. (D&C 1:14) The arm of the Lord will be revealed. Those who will not hearken will be cut off.

Therefore, the Lord tells us, he has called a prophet and reestablished His kingdom on the earth.

“Wherefore, I the Lord, knowing the calamity which should come upon the inhabitants of the earth, called upon my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., and spake unto him from heaven, and gave him commandments . . .” (D&C 1:17).

If you knew the dam had broken upstream, and a great wall of water was rushing toward your city, you would certainly try to warn everybody to get higher because of the impending calamity. If you knew that an enemy army was marching on your community or state with destruction in mind, you would warn all who would listen. If the drinking water in your home town was infected with a deadly virus, you would sound the alarm loudly and clearly, and enlist the help of any others willing to assist you lift the warning voice. And everybody who knows about the "calamity which should come" ought to be involved in giving the warning.

"And that every man should take righteousness in his hands and faithfulness upon his loins, and lift a warning voice unto the inhabitants of the earth; and declare both by word and by flight that desolation shall come upon the wicked" (D&C 63:37).

"Behold, I sent you out to testify and warn the people, and it becometh every man who hath been warned to warn his neighbor" (D&C 88:81).

"And the voice of warning shall be unto all people, by the mouths of my disciples, whom I have chosen in these last days. And they shall go forth and none shall stay them, for I the Lord have commanded them" (D&C 1:4,5).

Twenty-three times the Doctrine and Covenants speaks of this warning, or of this need "to warn the inhabitants of the earth to flee the wrath to come" (D&C 124:106).

What escape does the Lord offer those who will flee? What results does he hope to see in the lives of His mortal children? Review D&C 1:20-28 and note (mark?) the significant phrases that begin with the words "That" and "And"

"That every man might speak in the name of God the Lord" (1:20).

"That faith might also increase in the earth" (1:21).

"That mine everlasting covenant might be established" (1:22).

"That the fulness of my gospel might be proclaimed" (1:23).

"That they might come to understanding" (1:24).

"And inasmuch as they erred it might be made known" (1:25).

“And inasmuch as they sought wisdom they might be instructed” (1:26).

“And inasmuch as they sinned, they might be chastened, that they might repent” (1:27).

“And Inasmuch as they were humble they might be made strong, and blessed from on high, and receive knowledge from time to time” (1:28).

This is the choice: wait for the wall of water, the invading army, the deadly virus, the *coming calamity*, or accept the Lord’s alternatives listed above.

God gave His early disciples “power to lay the foundation of this church” but it seems that President Hinckley has done more than any other man since 1830 to bring this church “out of obscurity and out of darkness . . . ” (D&C 1:30) think of all he has done to make visible the only reliable source of security and safety in the last days.

Can you feel the longing of the Lord for the welfare and happiness of all His children in these verses?

“O inhabitants of the earth: I the Lord am willing to make these things known unto all flesh; For I am no respecter of persons, and will that all men shall know that the day speedily cometh; the hour is not yet, but is nigh at hand, when peace shall be taken from the earth, and the devil shall have power over his own dominion. And also the Lord shall have power over his saints, and shall reign in their midst, and shall come down in judgment upon Idumea, or the world” (D&C 1:34-36).

3. THIS COURSE WILL DISCUSS THE MAJOR EVENTS OF THE DISPENSATION OF THE FULNESS OF TIMES.

Thus, as we examine the major events of our dispensation, you might look at these lessons for additional content and a different (unusual?) perspective on the concepts of the lessons. But you should attend your weekly Sunday School class and learn from those who are called by the priesthood to teach these materials. I have no such call and that has bothered me from time to time. I do not wish to provide or encourage an alternative curriculum.

I hope there is no sense that I am undermining the manual or detracting from

the work of inspired writers and editors and members of the correlation committee that reviewed the published lessons. If you are a teacher, you *must* make the manual your first source for lesson content and outline, and the scriptures your first source for insight and inspiration. Next to these, this cyberspace discussion is a pale shadow of significance.

4. WE CAN EACH HELP TO MOVE FORWARD THIS GREAT LATTER-DAY WORK.

When Moses blessed the tribes of Israel before they entered the Promised Land, he gave a special charge to Ephraim and Manasseh, the sons of Joseph, the birthright tribe (see 1 Chron. 5:1,2). He said:

“His glory is like the firstling of his bullock, and his horns are like the horns of unicorns: with them *he shall push the people together to the ends of the earth*: and they are the ten thousands of Ephraim, and they are the thousands of Manasseh” (Deut 33:17, emphasis added).

In our own day the Lord spoke to elders of the church and gave the a charge:

“For, behold, they shall push the people together from the ends of the earth” (D&C 58:45).

Speaking to one of His servants the Lord used even more impressive language:

“. . . thou shalt magnify thine office, and push many people to Zion with songs of everlasting joy upon their heads” (D&C 66:11).

Since it is our job to help move forward the great latter-day work, perhaps this one word—*push*—will help us understand what precisely we are to do. I suspect that well over 80% of you who read this are of Ephraim, and some small percent from Manasseh (if you are of another tribe, why don't you send me an e-mail at tedgibbons@yahoo.com). It would be interesting to know what tribes are represented out there). Anyway, you from Ephraim and Manasseh (and the others too, of course) have the responsibility to PUSH. Push people together, and then push them to Zion. *The stone cut out without hands*

will not roll without hands. Commercial builders have rendered a great service to us to assist us in remembering our duty. Whenever you go to a grocery store or other business with double doors, notice what has been written on the inside of nearly every one of them: 'PUSH.'

Every time you see that word, remember what you are to do. Look for non-members to push together (to the branches and wards and stakes) and then look for members to push to Zion, "with songs of everlasting joy upon their heads."

CONCLUSION:

Throughout the pages of the D&C, the Lord speaks of the words contained therein. He uses the phrase "these words" over and over again as he speaks of the feelings we ought to have about His revelations. Here is a sample what he has said to us:

1. "treasure up these words in thy heart" (6:20)
2. "remember these words" (8:5)
3. "give heed [to these words] with your might" (12:9)
4. "give heed unto these words and trifle not" (32:5)
5. "beware how you hold [these words]" (41:12)
6. "[these words] are to be answered upon your souls in the day of judgment" (41:12)
7. "Hearken ye to these words" (43:34)
8. "Treasure these [words] up in your hearts, and let the solemnities of eternity rest upon your minds (43:34)
9. "these words shall not pass away, but shall be fulfilled" (56:11)

Perhaps the Lord gave the best description of His words—the kind of words we find in the Doctrine and Covenants—in the Old Testament. He said

"The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times" (Psalm 12:6).

Those who search these commandments and hearken to them shall be greatly

blessed. They

“. . . shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper” (Psalm 1:3).

Copyright © 2005 by Ted Gibbons <tedgibbons@yahoo.com>. All rights reserved. No part of this text may be reproduced in any form or by any means for commercial gain without the express written consent of the author. Digital or printed copies may be freely made and distributed for personal and public non-commercial use.