The Liberal and Conservative View in Mormonism
Lowell Bennion and Chauncy Riddle - 1962

Dr. Bennion

Fellow teachers and students of the B.Y.U., It is always a pleasure for me to come here and try to share ideas with you. I come from an alien institution which is seventy percent Mormon. I haven’t been stoned yet and don’t expect to be tonight. It seems rather strange to me that the liberal position should be stated before the conservative one. I thought liberals were always reacting to the conservatives. This is a very intriguing subject and deserves a great deal more thought and time and preparation than I have been able to give it.

One of my friends asked a colleague what he thought a liberal was, and he answered:

A liberal lacks testimony and faith in basic doctrines, such as capital punishment. He rejects revelation and evaluates scripture. The highest and final arbiter is his own reason; and he stresses the ethical and moral above the doctrinal. But he has one basic function (and this was said seriously): there needs to be opposition in all things. Somebody must play the role of Satan.

I think that the thing for me to do tonight is try to state some of the characteristics of the liberal Mormon or of the liberal position. I hope that Professor Chauncey will define what he means by the conservative in our faith. I would like to make a few assumptions here at the beginning—at least state some premises on which I mean to make my ad lib remarks tonight. The first thing is that I think both the conservative and liberal positions are respectable positions within the Mormon tradition. It isn’t “either or,” in other words. My former colleague, George Boyd, said that there are four attitudes we can take towards our faith. On the extreme left is the radical, then the liberal, the conservative, and on the extreme right the reactionary. Radical by the way, is a good word in its true meaning. I think it means to get at the root of things. But “radical” as it has come to be used, denotes a very disruptive force if it one’s position in religion. It might be described by Santyana’s statement that “a fanatic is one who doubles his speed after he has lost his aim.” I think a reactionary, on the other hand, might be illustrated by a Calvin Coolidge story. The story is that he went horseback riding with an obstinate senator who was always opposed to everything. When they separated, President Coolidge turned and looked back at the senator and was greatly surprised to see that both he and the horse were going in the same direction. Somebody put it this way, of literature: “A society without a good conservative element is not a balanced society. The color-giving, life-giving element in our society is the liberal element.”

Now, I believe that both a liberal and a conservative—at least in the Mormon tradition—can be orthodox; and I think that they both can be unorthodox too. So I don’t think liberalism or conservatism is primarily a question of orthodoxy. In my definition, we have had some great liberals in the Church who were, I think, orthodox. The first one I will name is Joseph Smith. Was he orthodox? There are plenty of them who have a mixture, in my terminology of orthodoxy and liberalism. John Taylor, for example, was one. And I think men like Anthony W. Ivins and George Albert Smith were liberal in some whys. B. H. Roberts was a staunch liberal, I
think, and certainly he was orthodox. Talmage and Widtsoe had liberal streaks or tendencies or emphases. Carl Eyring and Tommy Martin, of your faculty, are men I have thought of as liberals. Dare I say, off the record, that I think David O. McKay and Hugh B. Brown are liberals, in my terminology? And if we dip into history, I would nominate Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Jesus and Paul as the great liberals, I also believe–and this is another assumption that I am making—that there must be a core of basic faith for a person to be a Latter-day Saint, be he conservative or liberal. We won’t go into that now. I think it might come up in the discussion. But if we don’t have a few fundamentals of belief and faith, then we’re just not Latter-day Saints, it seems to me, no matter what else we are.

I think most of us Latter-day Saints are a mixture of conservative and liberal elements. Emerson put it this way: “Men are conservatives when they are least vigorous, or when they are most luxurious. They are conservatives after dinner or before taking their rest, when they are sick or aged. In the morning when their intellect or their conscience has been aroused, when they hear music or when they read poetry, they are radical.” Robert Frost said (I thank a friend for this quote): “For, dear me, why abandon a belief merely because it ceases to be true? Thought about long enough and not a doubt it will turn true again. And so it goes. Most of the change we think we see in life is due to truths being in and out of favor.” Frost also said: “I believe in tradition with a bit of an idea bothering tradition.” He was a mixture of conservative and liberal, I think.

In the Saturday Review of Literature of March 23, 1964, I read this about universities: “The progressive view that a college should meet all the needs of a student, social, vocational, recreational and therapeutic, as well as intellectual, is now so widely accepted as to have become conventional. The real radicals today are those unreconstructed traditionalists. The main thing, like at St. John’s College, is that training the intellect is the only proper goal of higher education. Consequently, the educational conservative, if he is conservative enough, discovers to his amazement that he is a far out pioneer.” This illustrates how the conservative and liberal points of view change in history as well as in the lives of individuals.

I think the Mormon religion contains both liberal and conservative elements in its teaching, organization and tradition. I don’t have time to spell them out; I will just mention them. Some of the conservative elements are: The Standard Works of the Church. Not that everything in them is conservative, but when people, hold to the Standard Works like the Christians have to the Bible then we are becoming conservative. I think the authoritative, bureaucratic structure of our Church is a conservative element. I think if we are not careful, the pioneer tradition may become a conservative element. I think our very beginning was anything but conservative—but conservative—the restoration of the gospel in the life of the boy, in the spring of the year, in the morning of the day. When I was a lad your age (I mean student age), Carl Eyring said that Joseph Smith was like a turkey in that he gobbled up everything and transformed it in the name of religion. This was the liberal, radical element in the beginning of our history. I think our doctrine of man, the eternal nature of man, free agency, eternal progression, man’s being in the image of God, lay priesthood, and such things in our Church certainly suggest the liberal approach to religion. Continuous revelation, commitment to education, rational emphasis, faith that we live in a law-abiding universe, that God is bound by law, that man is saved no faster than he gains knowledge, all are, to me, in harmony with the liberal position.
Now, I would like to move into my main theme here and strongest some characteristics of a Mormon liberal.

1. He has faith in reason, in the use of the mind, and believes that he should bring his full power of mind to bear on everything, including religion, where ever reason can be fruitful. I believe the liberal takes Jesus seriously when he said, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy mind and with all thy strength.” This doesn’t mean that a liberal has faith in reason only, or that he thinks that the only approach to religion is the rational approach. Goethe said that “life divided by reason leaves a remainder.” This is the area of faith, of values–many of them. I think that perhaps the greatest things in religion are faith and love and integrity. These things are not what I would call rational. Let religion transcend reason, of course. But I think that religions should not go contrary to reason and experience. I think a liberal person would call into question anything which contradicted his basic experience in life and the logic of his experience and thought. I got this from an old mission president, Brother Salzner, a German, uneducated in a formal way. He was helping me to build a room one day and was telling me about his Sunday School class–the kind of discussions that went on in the Gospel Doctrine class. He finally said, Brother Bennion, I just don’t believe in anything that doesn’t make good horse sense.” I agreed with him. One had better question anything in religion that doesn’t “make good horse sense,” particularly anything that goes contrary to that which reason and experience attest, and that which goes contrary to the basic fundamental principles of religion itself. Within the context of religion, it seems to me, one ought not to sacrifice reason to faith. There will be lots of room for faith in religion and in life. If we are to place faith in reason I think this means that we must think freely and honestly.

We cannot think at times in religion and then close our minds to our religion at other times. For instance, the other Sunday night at a fireside among professional people and very high type, devout Latter-day Saints, we were discussing an issue. A surgeon, a wonderful man–I know him personally and his work as a surgeon–said that when it came to many questions in religion he didn’t try to understand them or draw his own conclusions. He referred his questions to Harold B. Lee or to Joseph Fielding Smith. I said, “When you operate in the surgery room do you refer your judgment to someone else? You go in with a prayer in your heart, but do you rely on anyone else’s judgment or skill when you are operating?” He said, “No. I trust my thinking; I trust my hands.” But in religion this man does not think things through. He relies upon an authority. I think this is contrary to the liberal spirit.

I might further illustrate this by a quotation from B. H. Roberts, from his Seventy’s course of study in theology for the fifth year. He says, “I maintain that simple faith, which is so often ignorant and simpering acquiescence and not faith at all, but simple faith taken in its highest value, which is faith without understanding of the thing believed, is not equal to intelligent faith, the faith that is a gift of God supplemented by earnest endeavor through prayerful thought and research to find a rational ground for faith, for acceptance of truth, and hence the duty of arriving at a rational faith, in which the intellect as well as the heart or feeling has a place in its effect.”

I’m not sure I have time here for more quotes. I will save some for later I may need them.
2. Because a liberal Mormon has faith in reason, I think he has a profound respect for other approaches to truth and reality besides religion: to science, philosophy and the arts. I learned from a college companion, Angus S. Cannon, that our only access unto truth is by correlating all of our experiences: in religion, science, philosophy, the arts, and everyday life. Goethe said, “If you would look into the eternal, look at the present from all sides.” There are those in our Church who drive new cars, and even aircraft, who are alive today because of the findings of science, and who use scientific data to establish the Word of Wisdom or the Book of Mormon, and then in the next breath “pooh-pooh” human research, calling it the theories of men and the philosophies of men. This attitude a liberal does not like. I think if we are going to have respect for the scientific method, we ought to have respect for it all the time, not just when it’s to our advantage. I don’t mean we can’t be critical of it. This we should always be.

It seems to me the basic ways of knowing are rationalism or reason, experience or empiricism, revelation, and intuition. I think one should not be put above another necessarily. I rather think that each has its rather wonderful basis for arriving at truth. I think—in fact, I believe with all my heart—that intuition should be checked by reason and experience. I believe that revelation should be checked by reason and by experience. And I believe that experience and reason should be checked by revelation and by intuition. I believe that we should use each approach to life where it’s fruitful and let them check one another in our limited human experience.

3. The liberal Mormon has faith in the essential goodness of man. He is not blind to man’s capacity also for evil; he has plenty of evidence of this. But I think that the weight of the restored gospel is on the side of trust in human nature and working for this realization in one’s self and one’s fellow men. I think this positive, affirmative view of human life is affirmed in the creation story—man in the image of God. I had the privilege of baptizing and confirming a wonderful, intelligent German lady; and the thing that brought her to the Church was this idea—that we are truly children of God. She had grown up in the Catholic-Protestant tradition, and she said, “How could anything that is a creation of God, and especially a child of God, not be more good than bad?”

I think a liberal takes Jesus’ view of human nature. I believe that a liberal has a tremendous concern for man. The most important thing in the universe for a liberal Mormon ought to be personality—individual human beings. I think that “This is my work and glory, to bring to pass the immortality and godlike life of man” is the very heart of the liberal creed or liberal emphasis. There is just one thing more important than the gospel of Christ and that is personality which it is serving, to which it is trying to help bring self-realization and fulfillment. I think man is the most important thing on earth, the gospel second, and the Church third. The Church is instrumental in teaching the gospel and the gospel is instrumental in realizing the values in human life that man needs to realize. The liberal is deeply concerned with the moral and ethical aspects of religion. This doesn’t deny the doctrinal or the spiritual aspects. In fact, this follows from our concept of God and his attributes and his purpose. I think the liberal is on the side of the prophetic tradition rather than the priestly. I’ll just give one quote and move on. Amos said, “I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings, and your meat offerings, I will not accept them; neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take thou away from me the noise of
thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols. But let judgment run down as water, and righteousness as a mighty stream.”

I think where there is conflict between theological interpretations and the basic moral teachings of Christ that the moral teaching should have preeminence. I think it’s a bad theological interpretation that would stand in the way of great moral emphases of the Savior and the prophets. I think too, in this connection, that a liberal cannot delegate moral responsibility. I have met people in the Church who thought that they would do anything that anybody in authority told them to do and then it would he that authority’s responsibility if they did wrong. I was leading a discussion with some seminary teachers one evening when one of the teachers said to another, “Would you kill Brother Bennion if so and so told you to?” The other teacher replied, “I surely would.” This frightens me.

I see my time is up and I am only two-thirds through. Let me close with one or two brief remarks. I believe that a liberal thinks in terms of fundamentals, both in theology and in moral teachings. I think he distinguishes between the lesser and the greater matters of the law. “Woe unto you Scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites who pay tithes of cummin and anise and omit the weightier matters of the law. These ought ye to have done and not left the others undone.” Here’s a Jewish scholar, Klausner, who doesn’t accept Jesus as the Christ, but loves his emphasis on principles. He says, “The sin of the Scribes and Pharisees is two-fold. What is of primary importance they make secondary, and what is secondary they make of primary importance. They pay more regard to the letter of scripture than to the spirit. But there is a new thing in the gospel (and this is one reason why I think Jesus is a liberal)—Jesus gathered together and, so to speak, condensed and concentrated ethical teachings in such a fashion as to make them more prominent than in the Talmud, where they are interspersed among more commonplace discussions. Even in the Old Testament, and particularly in the Pentateuch, where the moral teaching is so prominent and so purged and so lofty, this teaching is yet mingled with ceremonial laws or matters of civil and communal interest, which also include ideas of vengeance and harshest reproof.”

I think a liberal will hold fast to the great fundamentals, the impartiality of God, free agency, the brotherhood of man, love and integrity. I believe that a liberal respects authority but believes it should be exercised in humility. He has no respect for authoritarianism. He has high regard for dogmas which are necessary in theology. But is opposed to the dogmatic attitude even in matters of faith. He looks to the future, to the unknown, to that which is yet to be. He has enough faith in the gospel of Christ to experiment with it, to plant a seed and let it grow in his life. Here is a quote from Max Lerner: “To move into the wilderness with the intent of creating fresh settlements means that you refresh and keep alive whatever it is you take with you, but you must have something to take.”

A liberal Mormon stands on something, or ought to, or he isn’t a Latter-day Saint. Lerner says this about American civilization or history. I would like to adapt it to Mormonism:

Almost every civilization has its Genesis under hard conditions. It is during this formative period when new things are happening that a people’s institutions and national character take shape. Sometimes catastrophe overtakes them early end then comes either the darkness
of the end or else the catastrophe serves to bring a rebirth of creativeness. Sometimes the process of social revolution may renew the latent energies or break the log jam of the dammed-up ones. But in most instances, after the springtime (note this, please), after the springtime of great creativeness a civilization settles down to live on the accumulated capital of its achievement. It loses its sense of newness and power and grows rigid. It hugs its past instead of fashioning its future. It becomes, in Elliott’s phrase, ‘an old man in a dry season.

Now, religion is saved by its own inherent power of generating more religion. If, instead of looking at religion as a thing that can only be had in this world by having enough of it saved, and people begin looking at religion as an adventure, something that is very much alive, being creative all the time, something that keeps destroying old tissue in itself and building up new tissue from day to day and from generation to generation, they would have no fear at all either for their own religion or for other people’s. Here is an old quote:

“If the good people of Tennessee, instead of being scribbled off by the public-opinion of a whole world in their little local eddy of fear and unbelief into a panic for God, would come to feel the religion in them as a compelling and implacable force, the last thing they would do would be to try to protect it or try to protect God. When man’s religion stops thinking of itself as a rock of ages; thinks of itself as it is in the Bible, as a budding creative and growing thing, as a great spiritual vine, religion lets itself go, reaches out, uses it for its own ends, climbs up science like a trellis.”

William James put it this way: “A genuine firsthand religious experience is bound to be a heterodoxy, to the one who experiences it, the prophet appearing as a merely homely madman. If his doctrine proves contagious enough to spread to any others, it becomes a definite and labeled heresy. If it then still proves contagious enough to triumph over persecution, it becomes an orthodoxy. And when a religion has become an orthodoxy, its day of inwardness is over. The spring is dry. The faithful live it secondhand exclusively and stone the prophets in their turn.”

My time is up. Thank you.

Dr. Riddle

Since Dr. Bennion has preempted all the good people and all the good things for liberalism, there is really not so much left to say. However, we don’t agree and therefore I take the privilege of going on. I would like to say a word first about labels, Labels are unfortunately pretty dangerous things because seldom do all the things that the boxes contain actually fit the label. Historically speaking, the labels of conservatism and liberalism have arisen in particular political situations, and in these situations they served well. But in later situations, as they have come to apply to other things, this has sometimes led to important errors, I think it difficult, in a sense, to categorize the truth as to whether it’s liberal or conservative, I am here ostensibly to represent a conservative point of view, and I will come up with a definition of conservatism which I think is appropriate. However, I would like to move into an area of discussion of
religion, much as Brother Bennion has done, first of all, so that we can make some contrasts clear, and that my definitions will have a little more meaning.

Before we go to religion itself, it might be well to make a few statements about how we achieve knowledge in religious areas. First of all, I think that it is important that everyone think through their own pattern of life. Consistency is a great jewel. And if a person will think enough and will consider his mode of action and will try and make himself consistent with something, he is going to achieve a better life. I take it to be one of the crowning achievements of any human being to achieve charity. In consistency of action it is one of the crowning attributes of real character.

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How can a person do this? First of all, a person has to be sure what his epistemology is. We have to know from what source we are going to recognize and accept any new ideas. Until we establish an epistemology, everything else is purely relative. And so we have a variety of epistemologies. We have those of rationalism, empiricism, intuition. Brother Bennion mentioned these. We also have the one of authoritarianism. I wondered if he wasn’t sometimes equating religion with authoritarianism. But this has been the traditional mode of religious knowledge without question. I like to think that there is another, distinct from all these, and this is the means of revelation. If we would take the time to examine each of these, we would find that there are certain fundamental flaws in each one. Brother Bennion said that we need to have a total approach to the problem of knowledge. We can’t depend simply on reason and we can’t depend simply on sensation, nor simply on revelation. All of these have to go together. But I think there are certain emphases we will want to make in making this combination. Once a person has established an epistemology, the source from which he is going to get his ideas, and the principles by which he will make his decisions, then he can go on his basic metaphysics as to the nature of the world. The liberal position, for instance, is based on a particular view of man, for one thing, as Brother Bennion brought out very clearly. But the question is, where did this idea come from? And thus we have to go back to the epistemology to discover. Once we have established the metaphysical standard as to what we think men are, what we think the nature of the universe is, what kind of person God is, then we can go on to the moral and ethical situation, and this is the area of religion proper.

Now, with that much of an introduction, let me turn to our own religious scene. It seems to me that as I try to understand our gospel in terms of liberalism and conservatism, I get very confused in a sense. So I am going to put this in a little different frame. I think there is one way which we might call the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I’m not claiming to understand this personally. I think I see some elements of it. I choose to call this the straight and narrow way. Now, there are many aberrations from this; in fact, there are millions of ways to differ from the gospel of Jesus Christ, from that straight and narrow way. We have full galaxies of positions. One galaxy might be called the right; one galaxy might be called the left. The attempt to characterize these galaxies by any set criteria is extremely difficult. As soon as I make some statement as to what they might be, you will say, “Well, I’m on this side and I don’t believe that.” or “I know somebody who doesn’t believe that.” But I am going to attempt to make a statement about the nature of each of these three groups: Those who are on the straight and narrow; those who are on the right, we might say; and those who are on the left. Now, mind
you, I’m not taking a great stock in these terms “right” and “left”; they are simply convenient handles. The right generally is those who are reactionary; the left generally is those who are liberal. Now let’s proceed through some criteria and see what sense we can make of this.

Let’s begin with those on the right. People who have the characteristics of those on the right, first of all, in relation to spirituality and revelation. Persons on the right tend to glory in past revelations. They take a glory in past prophets. They tend to think of the scriptures as being extremely authoritative, so much so that no one can challenge them in any way. They do not live by their own personal revelation, but they live by the revelation of other men.

Persons on the left reject the efficacy of revelation. Some go so far as to say that revelation is not only not necessary in all things, but it’s not possible in all things. And some even go so far as to say there is no such thing as revelation. Rejecting the efficacy of revelation at least to some degree, then, the person on the left will tend to depend on reason or upon science, as Brother Bennion has said. I take it to be the essence of the gospel, as I understand it, that we must be reasonable; we must open our eyes and look at the world; but that we must live by the spirit. To me, the fundamental teaching of the scriptures is that we must become as little children and accept Jesus Christ as our father, to be led by him in all things. He is the way; he is the truth; he is the light. I take it that he knows more than we do about any given thing relative to our mortal existence; and if indeed there is a possibility of discovering what he thinks about these things—what would be good in his sight to do—what way happiness lies—to me it seems clear that the way of wisdom lies in learning from him that which we should do. And so we are commanded by Nephi to “enter into the straight gate,” which is essentially to recognize our Savior, to take upon ourselves his atonement, and to covenant with him to live by his spirit in all things. In other words, to keep all his commandments which he has given us. Then we are told plainly, once we have entered in at this gate, if we have fulfilled the steps completely, we shall be told and led in all things that we should do. There is nothing which is not important in our lives in the sight of God. He is willing to save us from all of our enemies—from ignorance, from fear, from trouble, eventually from death and trial, but not until we have wrestled with these things and show that we love righteousness more than we love comfort.

Secondly, what is the reaction relative to authority of these three groups of people? People on the right tend to criticize the present authorities in favor of past authorities. How many people just up and said President McKay was doing a terrible thing when he ordained the Seven Presidents of Seventy as High Priests? Joseph Smith said this was contrary to the order of heaven and therefore President McKay was wrong, they thundered. Well, what was the attitude of those on the left? The attitude of those on the left—mind you, I hope you won’t personify somebody in your mind, though this is the natural temptation when I talk about these two groups—think of these as positions—but persons on the left are likely to be rather indifferent to the whole thing and say, “Well, what does it matter? It’s kind of relative anyway.” Generally, people who take several positions, as I would gather from what they tend to say, are inclined to be just a little indifferent to what the prophets say, especially those prophets whom they consider to be narrow. There is a tendency to classify the prophets and to consider some to be extremely narrow-minded, some not so bad, and some really quite reasonable. I think a person on the straight and narrow will take those who are in authority over him quite seriously. He will not obey slavishly any human being. In fact, one of the principles of the gospel is simply the
principle of freedom from believing what any human being says. Because this person lives by the spirit, he will get down on his knees whenever the President of the Church speaks—and say, “Lord, did you tell President McKay to say that?” And if he is living by the spirit, he will find out whether President McKay is supposed to say that or not. And it’s my judgment that he will discover that the authorities of the Church are doing the will of the Lord. And finding from the Lord that they are doing his will, then they are happy to cooperate and they support fully with their prayers and with their faith and with their labors those who stand in authority in the priesthood over them, not only the President of the Church, but their stake president and their bishop and their father in the patriarchal order, should they be so fortunate as to have a righteous father in that order. Well, Brother Bennion mentioned those who delegate their authority to other people, who say that because so and so says to do it, this absolves me of any responsibility. I think clearly this is one of the errors of the way we should treat authority. This is what a person whom I would call on the right would tend to do. But a person who is on the straight and narrow accepts the word of the authority because the Lord tells him to and this is his reason for doing it. And so if his bishop, or stake president, or the President of The Church tells him to do something that he thinks might be wrong, he will inquire of the Lord, and if the Lord tells him to do it, whether he thinks it’s wrong or right, out of respect to the Lord, believing that Jesus Christ is God, that he knows best, he will then do the will of the Lord and support that authority.

Thirdly, change. A person on the right, being principally a reactionary, will tend to resist all change. A person on the left is happy to change; in fact, he is ready to change sometimes when change isn’t necessary. Sometimes there are trends of change that sweep through the world and it’s easy to jump on these “bandwagons” because this is the up and coming thing to do in the world of intellectuals status and so forth, and it’s awfully easy to jump onto this “bandwagon” I think one of the essences of the person who is on the straight and narrow is to change at the will of the Lord; to change only as the Lord directs; as Paul says, “to hold fast to that which is good,” but to test all new things that come along, and if they prove to be good too, if they are the mind and the will of the Lord, be glad and ready to change for these things. To me, to be on the straight and narrow is the greatest intellectual challenge that a person can ever have. It takes as much study, as much prayer, as much hard work, as much working with other human beings as any other position in the world. Furthermore, I take the gospel of Jesus Christ to be a rather radical movement. It is not a reactionary movement. In the words of Harold B. Lee– he made a statement once that caught my imagination and fired it and I have been grateful for this precious thought ever since— “The activities of the Church of Jesus Christ are a constant revolution against the substandard conditions of the world.” It’s our work as a church to go forth among the peoples of the earth and to bring about a change in their lives. But we will do this under the direction of the Lord, Jesus Christ. We will not trust ourselves, we will not trust simply our reason, but we will try to serve the Lord and bring to pass the kind of kingdom, the kind of righteousness, the kind of law-abiding societies that he would have us bring about. In this respect, we are trying to create an army, I take it, in this Church, to bring about such a change. But I take it too that the army will be effective only when it serves the Lord, when it puts its faith in him and not in the things of men.

Fourthly, responsibility. Persons on the right love and seek authority over men, and are very anxious to have positions in the Church. And so they seek these things and they glory in them.
They delight to be honored by the titles of their office. This isn’t peculiar to them, but they do this nevertheless. Persons who might be said to be on the left take authority in stride, but they don’t think of it as being something ultimate really. They think of this as a kind of necessary and important function perhaps in a society to have order, but there is no necessary eternal significance in the thinking of many of them. But I take it that a person who is on the straight and narrow recognizes that a position of authority in the Church is a stewardship before God. And that this stewardship is over real and very important things, namely, the lives of people. I agree with Brother Bennion that there is nothing so important as people. But the way to help people is by learning from the Lord what is good for them, what we can do to help them. And a person who receives a position of authority in the Church, I think, will tremble at the responsibility. He will recognize that he has a responsibility for the welfare of his own eternal soul to do the very best thing he can for these persons; to be to them kind and loving; to be completely unassuming; never to exercise his authority in unrighteous dominion; but to teach them in all simplicity and humility principles of truth and righteousness by which they can correct the ills of their lives. Now, this takes some real doing. It’s one thing to be ordained and set apart as the bishop of a ward; it’s quite another thing to discharge that responsibility. And any person, I think, who concedes what this is all about will tremble in his position. He will fear, in a sense, his own weaknesses, and he will seek with all his might the help of the Lord to discharge this responsibility, that he might show forth love, that he might not hurt or harm any of those in his charge in any degree.

Fifthly, how do people judge? The person on the right tends to judge rather harshly by the letter of the law. He will love to see people caught in iniquity and see them squirm through the full benefit of the punishment available. A person who is on the left, on the other hand, tends to have a good deal of the milk of human kindness in his soul. He is likely to forgive all men all things. He will say that there really isn’t anything ultimate about these things. A person who is living on the straight and narrow, however, will judge only when absolutely necessary and will judge then only the Lord’s judgement. He will not presume to discern of himself what is good and bad in this person, but will seek the mind and will of the Lord and will judge only when necessary. For instance, people who are taken in moral transgression; the tendency of the person on the right is to cut them off immediately. The person on the left tends to forgive them and say, “Well, this isn’t really too serious. After all, we all have problems,” and so forth. But the person who is on the straight and narrow, I think, will labor with this person, trying to get him to see the wonderful opportunity of repentance, of escape from the power of Satan that is afforded through the gospel of Jesus Christ, of the blessings and the opportunities of the atonement of the Savior that we might be forgiven of our sins. That by turning to him and seizing upon the power of the holy spirit, we might repent of these things and do them no more.

Sixthly, ordinances. A person on the right is likely to think of ordinances as sufficient and all important. Once they’ve been baptized in the true church this is all that is necessary. Everything is pretty cut and dried from that point on. Or, if they are married in the temple, they are thereby guaranteed exaltation. A person on the left frequently will think that ordinances are nice, but really not very necessary. They perform an aesthetic and didactic function, but they could be changed, they could be done away with perhaps without any serious loss. Now, many people on the left would say, “No, I don’t believe that, It’s true, but again I am saying that there are many people on the left who do believe this. I’ve heard people say about the temple ceremony
that it was an insult to their intelligence. Well, I think the temple ceremony is indeed a challenge to a person’s intelligence. But I think that if we would bring to bear all the faculties of reason and imagination, humility and spirituality that we can, we will find that the ordinances are actually channels of power unto men, and they are absolutely indispensable. Only by partaking fully of the ordinances, of the blessings appertaining to each of them, can we hope to receive that power into our lives which will enable us to be saved from our human predicament. This I take to be the position of the straight and narrow, shall we say. But once the ordinance is performed, is all done? Of course not. A person then has to live by the covenants he has made when he received this power from the ordinance. And if he lives by them fully, enduring to the end, then and only then will he reap the benefits therefrom. I think it’s important, in this connection to realize that a person, who lives on the straight and narrow does not live for tomorrow. He lives for tomorrow in a sense, but he lives principally for today. The gospel is the power to bring happiness into men’s lives here and now, and if the ordinances of the gospel don’t make us better persons, more powerful persons in righteous causes here and now, we are not profiting by them. We see in them only the opportunity of blessings after we are dead. I think we miss the point quite completely.

Seventh, allegiance. The person on the right is likely to have allegiance to tradition. The person on the left will have his allegiance to certain ideologies. We will dwell on this somewhat further. But, frankly, a person on the straight and narrow gives his allegiance to God and to the prophets, to the whisperings which he receives into his own heart and mind, and to the prophets whom he has tried and found true and knows that they are the prophets of God, and not to what some man says about God.

Now, on doctrine. A principle doctrine that differentiates men is the doctrine of man, as Brother Bennion has pointed out. A person on the right is likely to say that man is depraved. He is evil and inherently is captive to the will of Satan, and cannot do good. A person on the left is likely to say that man is good and that all he needs is to be released from certain evils of tradition and habit and this goodness will shine forth. If you could make him sufficiently reasonable, then he could overcome the errors of tradition and can thusly be saved. I think the position that I would understand to be that of the straight and narrow is to see that man, whatever he is for each individual person on the inside because of the fall of Adam, is in dire straits. He’s in a predicament where he cannot save himself. He is cut off from knowing truth, and in the absolute sense, or final sense, he is cut off from determining by his own reason or by his own senses what the ultimate moral values of the universe are. He is thrust upon the opinions of other men, the exigencies of immediate experience to conduct the affairs of his life. In this predicament the only way out that is reasonable and consistent is to seize upon the hand that is extended by the Lord and to be grateful to be lifted out of that predicament through the power of the gospel and the ordinances of the priesthood.

Well, finally, what are the fundamental errors of these positions? I take it that the fundamental error, of those who are on the right is that they simply do not love righteousness. They are, as the Savior said, hypocrites, in his most scathing denunciations of the Pharisees. He called them those who were whitened on the outside but inside were full of uncleanness. They desired to appear to have the form of righteousness before men, but they would not put on the power of Godliness and in fact denied it.
I take the fundamental errors of the left to be, first of all, trust in human reason. And I think this is the principal tenant of the liberal position, as Brother Bennion has said. But why should we not trust human reason? There are some very simple reasons. In the first place, human reason always has to start with premises. Where are you going to get your premises to start reasoning with to be reasonable? If reason is ultimate, and above your religious faith, where are you going to get your premises? You’ve got to drag them out by the hair of the head from some place. Where are they going to come from? It would be my position, as I understand the gospel, that we must get our fundamental premises from the Lord. Therefore, we must put our faith and trust in him first. I think the first principle of the gospel is faith in the Lord, Jesus Christ and not faith in reason. And secondly, I think that we can reason then, when we get correct principles upon which to reason. I think men are not sure when they are reasoning correctly. If you would wish to check into the theories of logic and mathematics, you will discover that it’s impossible to know when a system is actually completely consistent. As far as you want to go in the processes of human logic, you will discover that certain systems of simple logic are good because we haven’t yet found troubles in them. And I would suppose that certain simple systems and aids turn out always to be good. But we discover men doing all kinds of things in the name of reason. All kinds of aberrations in the fields of religion and politics in the lives of men are conducted in terms of reason. The traditional Christian church, when it abandoned—or shall we say, after the apostasy—-took over reason as its principle tenant and guide and the Christianity of the second and third centuries and on was a life of reason. But what travesties were perpetrated in the name of reason. What terrible evils have come to men because of this. Note that any man can make his position reasonable. It’s always possible to adduce sufficient premises that we can prove any conclusion we wish to be a reasonable conclusion as long as we are not particularly concerned what the premises are. But to say that we put our trust in reason is indeed, I think, putting our trust in something that is not worthy of our trust. Now, mind you, I am not saying that we shouldn’t be reasoning. I believe in reason. But reason should not be our ultimate God. Reason should be the thing that we use to make ourselves consistent with our God, and in that we need to apply it with all the force of our intellect and vigor. Remember the story of Abraham. Was it reasonable for him to take Isaac out and slay him? No, it was not reasonable because Isaac was the son through whom all things were promised, and if he were to take Isaac out and kill him, where would his posterity be? So Abraham trusted the Lord. He knew that Jesus Christ was God and he trusted him even to the overpowering of his own reason. Now, we wouldn’t trust any man that way, but we should trust the Lord, Jesus Christ, that way. And if he tells us to do something, even if we don’t understand it, even if it appears not to be reasonable, if we know him and trust him as the Lord, this should be sufficient for us, I would think.

Well, let’s move on and just draw a few conclusions now since the time is about gone. I think that one way of drawing these conclusions would be to follow down Brother Bennion’s outline of some of these principles. I think we have just dealt with number one—that faith in reason is the principle characteristic of a liberal. Number two— respect for all other approaches to truth. It is important, I think, for anyone to respect anything that is good from whatever source it comes. He also quoted a saying which says that “religion climbs up science like a trellis.” This is indeed the way it usually works when a person puts his trust in reason. But frankly, as Elder Harold B. Lee said, in explaining this, it is like asking a lion to lie down with a lamb. Many religions have
made the attempt to make their peace with science, and in a sense they have tried to justify their beliefs by the use of science. And in every historical case, science has finally gobbled up and eradicated, in a sense, the science. This is the predicament of present Christianity, particularly the Protestant branch. It tried to justify itself by platonian science. Platonian science has gone out the window and so has the doctrine of most of the Protestant churches. This is just their dilemma. Unless a person has his fundamentals in revelation, he will discover that everything else will let him down.

Well. I don’t think we have time to go through all of these. Maybe we’ve said enough. Let me simply conclude now by defining what I think conservatism in the Gospel would mean. To me, a conservative is a person who has something worth hanging on to; he has something to conserve, something that’s extremely precious; something that he has found to be most valuable in his life that he would not do without—a “Pearl of Great Price.” Something that, If he realized the full value of, he would sell all that he has to obtain it. I take it that the essence of the conservative position in the gospel doesn’t need a label. I don’t think labels, as I said, are particularly valuable. But if you insist that there be a definition of conservatism in the gospel, I would say simply that conservatism is hanging onto that thing which is most precious, and that thing which is most precious is the Lord, Jesus Christ. To put our trust in him, to have complete faith in him, and to cling with all our might to his word, to his spirit. If we trust him as the Lord, this should be sufficient for us, I would think.

If there is anybody who respects the fact that there is a God of justice who will make men account for their acts, and therefore they need to respect him. If you want to use the word “fear,” we must fear the consequences of our own acts. We cannot be deliberately evil and reap a harvest of happiness. This is simply a fundamental fact of the universe. We experience this in our own daily lives, and the testimony of the gospel.

Secondly. the first access we have to God is through his prophets, but we don’t depend upon them to see if the gospel is reasonable. Having made our experiment, we accept the gospel, we receive the light of revelation into our lives, and then we have something to conserve. Then we have something worth hanging onto, not a tradition of men, not an authoritarian scheme, but we have the will of the Lord in our own heart and mind.

Well, this to me is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Maybe this isn’t conservative, but I’m not arguing about the terms. I have only one hope. I hope that eventually Brother Bennion and I will see eye-to-eye. I hope that eventually you and I will see eye-to-eye because I take as very literal the statement in the scriptures that if we are not one, we are not the Lord’s. I take it that through using all the faculties we have, and through hearkening to the prophets of God, we will come to see eye-to-eye and be united. And I hope that this might come true in our behalf, and I say it in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.
Dr. Bennion

Brother Riddle just did away with both conservatism and liberalism and put us on the straight and narrow. I have to follow him here too. I think there are three positions one can take on this general theme we’ve been talking about tonight. One can put reason first and use those parts of the gospel which conform to one’s reason. This, I suppose, would be what Brother Riddle would call the liberal position. I think the other extreme would be to rely upon the spirit, as he has done tonight. I don’t mean revelation. Anything that doesn’t agree with his inspiration would be rejected. Now, I’m not an “either or” man. I don’t put all my faith in reason nor all of it in the spirit. I’ve had enough experience in trying to think and in studying a little bit of science and philosophy that I don’t trust reason ultimately, any more perhaps than Brother Riddle. However, I think there are also difficulties in trusting one’s private inspiration. These are comparable to those which might arise from putting one’s trust in reason. Frankly, I think we have to live in both worlds. I said this before. I think we have to do our level best to have the spirit of the Lord and the Holy Ghost, and the spirit of Christ with us to guide us. And I think it’s equally important not to sacrifice reason to inspiration, but to carry them both, one on either shoulder. I know this is very difficult. One loses hair over this sort of approach. I dare say as many evils have been perpetrated in human history in the name of faith, in the name of inspiration, as have been in the name of reason.

A question I would like to present to Brother Riddle is, “How do you know whether or not your inspiration is the Lord’s, particularly if your inspiration seems to differ from that of a colleague in the same department, or if your inspiration should differ from that of your bishop or your stake president or a General Authority? What do you do about a difference in inspiration here?"

Dr. Riddle

I perceive that we’re getting close together already. I think this is a most fundamental question. I am very happy to answer it. I think a testimony of the truth can be built only on a number of bases. I think we must have revelation. But I see people in the Church who have revelation that’s apparently not from the Lord, because they go off in all directions and they do not produce things in their life that are good. So there must be a check on this revelation, and I think there are three principle checks that we can put upon this revelation.

First of all, does it agree with the Authorities that are put over us by the Lord? Now, if we are not members of the Church, this is a difficult thing to apply. But I’m presuming that most of us are members of the Church and that we have some semblance of an idea of who the presiding authorities over us in the Church are. I have never in my own life seen an occasion when my own personal revelation disagreed with anything that my stake president or my bishop has told me to do. And I think that this is one of the real checks that the Lord has put upon this thing. If we discover that our revelation, as we think, differs from what they say, we had better look to ourselves and see if we are really getting revelation from the right source.

Secondly. I think that the revelation must have some consistency and reason to it. We will be able to check this. We’ll be able to understand what goes on, perhaps not immediately, but in time. We’ll be able to go to the scriptures and see if it corresponds with what is said there. I
think this is a very important test that we can make. Some of you have heard me tell this story before. When President McKay first became President of the Church, he did something in conducting the affairs of the Church that was novel. I could see no reason for it, no basis for it in the scripture, and frankly I was shocked and dismayed. So I made it a matter of prayer for some time. And finally I got an answer to why he was going this thing. It was so clear and so reasonable when I got the affirmation that this was right that I was somewhat ashamed of myself for having asked the question in the first place. I believe this is the way the Lord works. He wants us to be reasonable. How many places in the scriptures does it say, “come now, let us reason after the manner of men”? But he also points out that his reason is not our reason. His ways are different from ours. He is God and we are men. He is better than we are and somehow I think that we had better trust in him and be, in a sense, blind in obedience to him if necessary. But let’s make sure it is him that we have our blind obedience to.

As I said, there are other checks.

Thirdly, there is the test of our own practical experience. If we will live the things that we are taught by the authorities of the Church, as we receive them through our own conscience, through the spirit, we will discover that they do bring happiness into our lives. And, as I take it, this is the testimony of everyone who has lived the gospel. They know that it works and, therefore, they are sufficient legal testators to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now, I think that a better check than these three a person could not have. Actually, there are four of them that must correspond: The revelation, the authority, reason, and the experience. And I think that this would be sufficient for any sane, intelligent person to find his way in the world.

**Dr. Bennion**
We are getting closer together. He too checks his inspiration by reason. I would just like to ask you, Brother Riddle, if I may--maybe I’m out of order and it’s your turn--what would you do when two revered authorities whom you respect disagree?

**Dr. Riddle**
Ask the Lord.

That’s what I have done. You say you ask the Lord. Then you and the Lord and one of the authorities are right.

**Dr. Riddle**
I have observed that there are lots of niceties of doctrine and speculation about things in the eternities that people tend to disagree on. I think the things that are most important are the things we ought to look to. If we will realize that the gospel is not principally a set of documents, but is principally a prescription for action. If we will take the action and act upon the things that we are supposed to; then we will know. And I think you will find, in the experiences of the councils of the Church, when the Church acts, the councils come to a unanimity of opinion and they do not act until they are at a unity of the faith. I think this is the reason why this is the true
Church, because the men of the council are inspired of God equally—perhaps not equally, but individually—and then they see eye-to-eye and then they act. So I think that anything that’s important for explicit action, the Lord will bring us to a unity of the faith on, if we will put our trust in him and do the things he has already said to do.

Dr. Bennion
Maybe it’s your turn, Brother Riddle.

Dr. Riddle
Where are you going to get your premises, Brother Bennion?

Dr. Bennion
I think the premises for religion are in revelation. You see, I agree with you.

Dr. Riddle
O.K. Let’s maybe take a specific case?

Dr. Bennion
Yes.

Dr. Riddle
This is kind of dangerous, but

Dr. Bennion
Let’s get this on an interesting basis.

Dr. Riddle
Is it moral to deny the Negro the priesthood?

Dr. Bennion
What would you do if a practice you taught were, from a rational point of view, contrary to the basic principles of the gospel of Christ and your inspiration, after thoughtful, persistent prayer? What conclusions would you draw? What would you do about it?

Dr. Riddle
Well, maybe I would decide I couldn’t belong to such an organization. I don’t know. Maybe I would decide that I had better go back and put this on the shelf a little bit. In my own mind I know there are certain things I don’t have answers to yet in the gospel. For there are so many things I have come to believe in. I know that there are difficulties of this sort that arise frequently, and I think this is the real test. I think that the test of our lives is principally, when it comes to matters like this, do we know where the real source is when the chips are down? If we think that there is an immorality in such an action on the Church, we will do so because we
think that there certain ethical principles that must govern this thing. But my question would simply be this: How do we know, in the perspective of eternity, that this is not ethical? How do we know that this is not moral? Do we know the mind of God? Is this his priesthood? The questions boils down to something like this: Is David O. McKay the prophet, or isn't he? Now, if I disagree with President McKay, I realize that either this isn’t the true Church perhaps, or maybe I’m out of line. These are difficult questions. They call for soul-searching. But I don’t think it pays to make up my mind hastily, and I think that there is a very serious problem in saying that we would challenge revelation on the basis of whether it is moral or not, because what is moral generally tends to conform with our prejudices. And if we have prejudices in a certain line, the purposes of the Lord …… and get them to do things they wouldn’t otherwise do. The Lord had to do something pretty drastic with Peter so that he was prepared to receive Cornelius into the Church. So he gave him a vision to break down his prejudices. The Lord works with men after this order. And I think the thing we need to do is to become as little children and submit all of our prejudice ultimately to the Lord to be corrected as he sees fit.

**Dr. Bennion**

Would you like to state your question again?

**Dr. Riddle**

Is it moral to deny the priesthood to the Negro?

**Dr. Bennion**

Moral or immoral?

**Dr. Riddle**

Moral.

**Dr. Bennion**

I don’t get that.

**Dr. Riddle**

Well, let’s leave it then.

**Dr. Bennion**

No, I’d like to say something about it since you’ve put me on the spot here. You see, I’m willing to go to “Podunk” if somebody in authority tells me to go there. I’m willing to walk by faith in darkness. I believe that we have to do this in life and in religion. The problem that comes to me is when I’m called upon to do something that goes against my feeling, my inspiration, the spirit that I am accustomed to hearkening unto, particularly when it’s also against what I think is the very heart and soul of the gospel of Jesus Christ and of theology. So I can’t just be happy in the present practice of the Church to deny the Negro the priesthood. I can’t come to a peace of mind over this question, frankly, because when I think of the justice and the mercy and the love of God, the impartiality of God–these things are so fundamental in the gospel–when I think of the
mercy and love of Christ, the brotherhood of man, the free agency of man, the Second Article of Faith—all fundamentals of the gospel—and the scriptures taken at large, these seem to indicate that we don’t have a very good rational explanation of why the Negro should not hold the priesthood. So I, at least, Brother Riddle, have to put a question after this practice rather than just dismissing it. You say our wisdom is not God’s wisdom, so we ought to rely upon him, but whenever we get into a bind in logic and consistency of the faith, do we abdicate and say, “Well, we can’t act on our best knowledge and inspiration at the moment?” This is a very difficult problem. I’m not fighting the Church on it. I follow President David O. McKay. I love him, and I have told him exactly how I feel about this Negro problem. And after telling him, he let me teach at the Institute of Religion for over a decade. This problem troubles him too. And I just have a feeling, both on the basis of reason and inspiration—if I’m capable of getting any—that something is going to take place here; that we are taking it seriously; and it may be that something will change in this area.

**Dr. Riddle**

I think confession is good for the soul. Perhaps I should make one too. This problem also bothers me.

**Dr. Bennion**

I’m glad. I hope it bothers every Latter-day Saint.

**Dr. Riddle**

But I do see this: This is a good, clear-cut case of where reason is not sufficient. The prophets have said that there is a reason, but they haven’t told us what the reason is. I don’t know that they know; I don’t know that they don’t know. But I also see this: I believe that our Heavenly Father loves the people who are Negro just as much as anybody else. I know that the gospel is available to them; they can receive baptism and the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost and they can advance much further than most people on this earth will ever do if they will seize upon the opportunity. I recognize too that receiving the priesthood is not inherently a blessing. I believe that this is a responsibility and it becomes a curse if we do not receive and discharge the responsibility. It becomes a blessing only when we fully discharge the responsibility. The Lord has said plainly that “many are called but few are chosen.” Most of the men in the Church presently who have the priesthood do not particularly honor it, and therefore there is no particular profit in it. Now, if the priesthood is only in honor of men, that we bestowed after the fashion of men, then indeed I would think it is immoral; then I would agree completely. But I believe that this is the power to act in the name of God. I’m not just trying to wave flags. But I do believe that it is at the discretion of the Lord, whose priesthood this is, as to when and where it’s going to be applied. I take great comfort in the statement of Brigham Young, that the time will come when these people will have every opportunity that everyone else has. And I thin that is the economy of the Lord. Every person is going to be judged fully on the basis of his own individual worth and not for the color of his skin. There are many people in this world who do not bear the priesthood. A very small fraction bear the priesthood, and for some reason, this one group has been barred from it. But the blessings that are available to them are so magnificent, so wonderful, that I think we ought to capitalize on
that and rejoice in the opportunity that we have to preach to them the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to all men.

I would just like to say that here is where the moral emphasis in religion is important. Apply the Golden Rule in this question. Put yourself in the other position. How important is the priesthood? If it were your child that were turned away from the ward at the age of twelve because of the color of his skin, how would you feel?

This isn’t the time to discuss this issue at length. It would take us two hours. I would like to conclude my little part in this dialogue with a quote from the Doctrine and Covenants. I think there’s no finer statement on revelation anywhere than in the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants. This is one of my premises: “Behold, I am God and have spoken it; these commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, and after the manner of their language (I think this means after the manner of their thinking), that they might come to understanding. And inasmuch as they erred it might be made known; and inasmuch as they sought wisdom they might be instructed; And inasmuch as they sinned they might be chastened, that they might repent; And inasmuch as they were humble they, might be made strong, and blessed from on high, and receive knowledge from time to time.” I think that even in our scriptures we have the problem of separating the divine and the human element on occasion. I think some things in scripture are more inspired then others, or are more important than others. I think there are even some contradictions in scripture. I have a feeling that God’s revelations to us individually and to the Church as a whole depend upon our minds, upon our eagerness, upon our search, upon our questions, upon our moral disturbances, if you will, upon our needs. I know that Brother Riddle believes this too. But it might be that you and I, and all of us in this Church, because of our sins, or because of our lack of thinking upon the great fundamentals that Christ taught, because of not having the Spirit of Christ, may sometimes be at fault for our limitations. It may be that the Lord can’t get through to us sometimes on some things. Therefore, we ought to be thinking and inquiring and searching; and praying even over this Negro problem.

Dr. Riddle

Capitalizing on what you just said, I think the most becoming attribute of any human being is humility. I think we should not be dogmatic with one another, but simply bear our witnesses. If I have found a little bit of something that leads me to happiness, if I will share that with you and you will share yours with me, I think we can help each other along the path this way. I think that the only person who is entitled to say, “I have the truth,” in a sense, is he who does stand in the place of the prophet. And, therefore, for us, we want to be careful. There are some other sayings in that first section of the Doctrine and Covenants that I that are precious, to go along with what you said. The Lord said that he revealed these things so that man might not need trust in the arm of flesh; that man might not counsel his fellow man; that every man might speak in the name of the Lord his God. I think this is the piece we are trying to get. We are all struggling to find the will of the Lord and to do it. I would that we would always do it when we know it. That’s the biggest difficulty. But I think that inasmuch as we will all apply the very best that’s within us, I think that people in the gospel of Jesus Christ, in a sense, are going toward a central point. I may be over here and you may be over there; but if we are going toward a
central point, we will get to a piece where we will have a unity of the faith. But because we come from such diverse points of the compass, we may not see eye-to-eye right now. And I think, therefore, that we need to be very tolerant with one another. We need to recognize that if we can progress point-by-point let’s not emphasize the distinctions among us; let’s emphasize the things we see in common. And as we look at these, the things we have in common will grow and we will attain a unity of the faith.

It is like the Book of Mormon. In the Book of Mormon it does not say only to pray and ask if it is true; what else does it say? It says to pray and ask if it is not true. Have you ever noticed that? Because if you have been reading along through the book and you get to Moroni 10:4 and you have not had a witness of the Spirit by that time, there is not much hope. In other words, as you read along you cannot help but get the witness of the Spirit telling you these things are true, as you go. Then the thing you are asked to do is to ask the Lord if maybe you have been fooled. Ask Him if it is not true then. And if you do not get an answer, then you have your answer, have you not? Frankly, I was always hesitating to apply the test because people kept telling me you are supposed to pray about the Book of Mormon and see if it is true. I have never been able to do that because every time I have read it the Spirit of the Lord has borne such a powerful witness to me that it was true, that if I were to say, “Lord, is it true?” I would be saying, “I didn’t believe you the first time, tell me again.”

Now I challenge you, when President McKay speaks in conference, if you can avoid a testimony at the time, pray and ask if this is (or is not, anyway you want), if this is not the will of the Lord. I am sure you will get your answer if you pray consistently. If you keep at it you will get an answer that will be soul-satisfying to you—not just an answer that takes care of your mind, but one that also takes care of your heart, so that you are lifted up to love that man if you do not already.

Let me read Just a few words from this wonderful man, our Prophet. This is very pertinent to what he has to say to us, connected with the life of our Savior that we have been talking about:

The teachings of the Master have never seemed to me more beautiful, more necessary and more applicable to human happiness. Never have I believed more firmly in the perfection of humanity as the final result of man’s placement here on Earth. With my whole soul I accept Jesus Christ as the personification of human perfection, as God made manifest in the flesh as the Savior and redeemer of mankind.

Accepting Him as my Redeemer, Savior, and Lord, I accept His gospel as the plan of salvation, as the one perfect way to happiness and peace. There is not a principle which was taught by Him but seems to me to be applicable to the growth, development, and happiness of mankind. Every one of His teachings seems to touch the true philosophy of living. I accept them wholeheartedly; I love to study them: I like to teach them.

So it is with the Church which Christ has established. Every phase of it seems to be applicable to the welfare of the human family. When I consider the quorums of the priesthood I see in them an opportunity for developing that fraternity and brotherly love which is essential to the happiness of mankind. In these quorums and in the auxiliaries of the Church I see opportunities
for intellectual development, for social efficiency. In the judicial phases of the Church I see ample means of settling difficulties, of establishing harmony in society, of administering justice, and of perpetuating peace among individuals and groups. In the ecclesiastical organizations I see an opportunity for social welfare such as cannot be found in any other organization in the world. Thus do Christ and His Church become my ideal, my inspiration in life. I think it is the highest ideal for which man can strive. (Instructor, January, 1963.)

Is there any doubt in his mind what the measure of Jesus Christ is?

So brothers and sisters, I hope we can come to a unity of the faith about our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. This is the knowledge that will save us. A man is saved no faster than he gains that knowledge.

We have said a lot of things; I hope that I have said the important things in regard to these matters. Inasmuch as I have or I have not, I simply take this stand before you: I do not know very much about the gospel of Jesus Christ. I say that because almost every day, every week, I learn something new and I am a bit ashamed for what I said yesterday. But I do see that what I was taught first fits well with what I was taught later—it is just that these details keep filling in. Sometimes I am tempted to get a little bit ahead of the details and start filling them in myself and then I usually have to backtrack. But I am grateful for the fact that in this Church there is a Holy Spirit; that there are prophets of God; that I can get up and talk to you, and you can tell me things, and we can learn and grow together in a love of our Savior and in a knowledge of Him, into a true body of Latter-day Saints.

I humbly pray that whatever errors of doctrine we might have in our minds, whatever lack of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, whatever fear of doing His work of His ministry, whatever emptiness there is in the place where should be a fullness of love for Him, that these things will be remedied as we study the life of our Lord and Savior these two years.

I pray that we might come to a unity of the faith and establish His kingdom, and I say this, bearing you my testimony that I know that the gospel of Jesus Christ is true. I know that it works. I have seen it demonstrated and the power of the priesthood so manifest in my life that I could never deny it. I bear you my solemn witness and the hope that I have in Jesus Christ that we all might enjoy a fullness of life in Him, and I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Question: Do we stand by the four Standard Works of the Church as our only scripture?

Let me read you what the Lord says. This is Doctrine and Covenants 68:2-4:

And, behold, and to, this is an ensample unto all those who were ordained unto this priesthood, whose mission is appointed unto them to go forth–

And this is the ensample unto them, that they shall speak as they are moved upon by the Holy Ghost.
Now these are the three lines of authority that we mentioned when we were talking about authority—those who are ordained, who are acting in their stewardship, who are speaking by the power of the Holy Ghost. This is what the Lord says about such people:

And whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will of the Lord, shall be the mind of the Lord, shall be the word of the Lord, shall be the voice of the Lord, and the power of God unto salvation. (verse 4.)

Now we have four books which are canonized scriptures, which means to say that a constituent body of the Church have raised their hands, assembled in general conference, and said that we the people will be bound by these four standard works. But there is a lot of other scripture. Remember that anything that any man says in the Church, who is functioning in his proper ordination, in his calling by the power of the Holy Ghost, is scripture. A bishop can speak scripture; a ward teacher can speak scripture; a quorum president can speak scripture; a stake president can; anybody who is sent by the Lord can speak scripture. This is why we are to keep careful minutes of our sacrament meetings of the admonition of the authorities, because the people of that ward will be bound by those words on the day of judgment. They are supposed to be there in that sacrament meeting and receive that word from the Lord’s representative, and pleading ignorance will be no excuse. One purpose of the ward teachers is to go out and make sure that every family gets the message.

When we pick up the Instructor and we read the statement by President McKay, is he acting in his calling? In his authority of ordination? By the power of the Spirit? It is up to each of us to judge the third aspect, but I do not think there is much question about the first two. I testify to you that this is the word of the Lord; this is scripture. And I think that we ought to treasure up the words of the First Presidency and the general authorities.

Have you noticed that every public speech by the First Presidency is carefully printed in the Church News? Why? Because it is scripture.

Why are the conference reports bound carefully and sent out to every bishopric, stake presidency, and high council? Because that is scripture, not just something to stack on the shelf and say “I have it here.” This is our living Doctrine and Covenants, shall we say.

I do not mean to detract at all from these books of canonized scripture. The two kinds must fit perfectly together, but nevertheless, may I make this bold statement: Every, written word on the earth could be wiped out right at this moment and it would not hinder our salvation one bit, if we would listen to the living prophets. In other words, it is the living scripture that saves us.

Unfortunately there are some people who will go back and say, “Joseph Smith said such and such. You don’t agree with him, therefore you’re wrong.” Like “You can’t make the seven presidents of Seventy High Priests,” and forth, as some people said to President McKay. This is exactly what the people said to Joseph Smith when he came along. They said, “We’ve got the New Testament, we don’t need you. The heavens are closed. exactly what they said to the Savior when He came along. They said, “We’ve got Moses, we don’t need you.” What did they say to Moses when he was alive? “We think you’re a faker; Abraham is our father.”
The hardest thing for men to accept is living prophets. Dead ones are very easy to accept. Why are dead ones easy to accept? You can take their words in the scriptures and make them into anything you want. And that is what people do. But you cannot take a living prophet and tell him to his face that that is not what he means. And that is why people get angry with the living prophets and that is why they sometimes stone them to death.