

Podcast Episode 9: Embracing Truth

QUESTION: As people from various religious traditions join the Restoration movement, how will that affect our understanding of the scriptures and the gospel?

DENVER: The problem is that when a new religious tradition emerges, it doesn't matter when or where, there's this predecessor culture of religion from which it emerged. And that brings with it all kinds of baggage. Well, right now the only thing that the Reformation, Restoration, Remnant-thing is contending with culturally is baggage from Mormonism. Some of it is fundamentalist, but much of it is LDS. Well, if what comes aboard next are Christians, they're going to be emerging from a completely different tradition with a completely different bundle of baggage that they'll bring aboard with them, and then we'll have to contend with that.

But at the end of the day, one of the primary issues is Luther rejected the errors of Catholicism and then preserved a Lutheran-Catholic theology. Time and time again, when Peter and James and John emerged from Judaism, they kept a great deal of the traditions of Judaism. So much so, that the debates in the New Testament reflect a conflict between those who think that you can preach Christ completely independent of the Law of Moses and those who say, "No, you've got to make a trip through the Law of Moses in conformity to the law in order to emerge on the other side as a Christian" -- the Judaizers (that's what they've been denominated), but we're no different. And the fact is that people would love to have bishops and stake presidents-- I mean, we've got our own little curiosities.

The interesting thing is that the fellowship program that has been recommended to us by a Higher Source, is almost an exact replication of what the New Testament congregations were like-- very informal, very unstructured. They had sacrament, they had baptism, and they had sharing of information and preaching. And they were diffused. In fact, the original model, because it was diffused, was far more resilient against corruption than what happened later when it all got consolidated under one umbrella, with one seat of power. As soon as you consolidate it under one seat of power, all you have to do is corrupt Rome, and the whole thing falls. But if you want to corrupt independent fellowships, you have to corrupt every single one of them because the gospel can continue to survive in a pure form, independently, everywhere. You gotta go kill every single one of them-- you have to corrupt every single one of them. And the farther along it gets and the more numerous there are of both body of teachings and believers, it becomes well nigh impossible to wreck the whole. You can wreck parts of it-- heck, parts of it are already wrecked. But you can't wreck the whole. And as long as the effort and the conferences remind

people of what really matters, even where fellowships have gotten a little wonky, they have the opportunity to come, cross-pollinate, repent, return to something that's a little more authentic and simple and Christlike.

And so when we bring aboard Christians, they will present their own unique bundle of challenges. And I hope no one's gonna to turn into a Mormonizer, like the Judaizers, and try and, you know, make warmed-over refugees from Salt Lake out of them all. They might bring with them some really interesting things that are useful for us to take to the Lord.

Some sects of Christianity are a lot more demonstrative and emotional, less inhibited than Latter-day Saints.

WOMAN: Amen.

DENVER: Right. In the conference center "Can I hear an Amen!" is rude, but in some evangelicals, they'll tear your face off at the "Amen" that comes back at you.

MAN 1: Well, along those lines, previously you've mentioned not just Christians, but you start getting Buddhists, and Hindu, and other Eastern religions, and they're going to bring a perspective to the *Book of Mormon*-- Judaism is going to bring a perspective to the *Book of Mormon* and to the *Torah* and so forth that we don't grasp right now.

DENVER: Hindus can do more with the *Doctrine and Covenants* than we've ever dreamt of.

MAN 2: So, why would a Hindu do better with the *Doctrine and Covenants*?

DENVER: Because there are transcendent moments in the description of how God is above all, and He's in all, and He's through all that resonate with the entirety of the Hindu mindset, about God and the process of becoming closer and closer until finally you become one with Him in a very different way than we say you become one. But those doctrines permeate-- I mean D&C 88:84, portions of 107, 76, you go through 130, which is really just an amalgam of sayings that got collected and stuffed together-- you go through that stuff and you put on a Hindu lens and you read it, you start saying "Aum..."-- you know, I'm approaching nirvana. I'm becoming one with God.

If you have seen any of the least of these moving in their majesty, speaking about the planets and the stars and the sun, then you have seen God moving in His glory. That's a really Hindu notion.

When Jesus was an Eastern mystic, He was in effect saying, “Go within yourself, and you’ll find God. The kingdom of Heaven is within you, and to fix the problem, stop with this outward behavior, and get into the heart. Don’t try not to murder; instead, learn to love. Don’t try not to engage in promiscuous immorality; instead, look within and find control of your passion and your love, and direct it towards God. Don’t try to gather notice for yourself on the street corner; go within, and find God’s approval for yourself, in your heart, in the way you live your life. Because if you find God in your private, personal devotion, then it won’t matter if people say all manner of evil against you falsely for my name sake.” You can rejoice, and you can be exceedingly glad because that’s how they treated the prophets before you. And the prophets had found God.

There are those who (and they write and they publish garbage) that are advocating a kind of Hindu approach to finding God now. The problem with that is that the spark of God may be inside of every one of you, but God is out there, and He would like to have actual contact with you. And so it’s not-- the journey is not entirely Hindu, it is not entirely within, but it is within where the spark ignites that resonates with God, and when you find God you will find out that He is other than you. He is outside of you; but He also extends within.

It's like taking a candle and lighting another candle and lighting another candle and another candle. Ultimately 100 candles later, if you bring the flame that is burning 100 candles later back to the first, you’ll see that they are similar flames. They both possess identical attributes. And that’s what God does. If God has a fulness-- if everything that is possible is in the possession of God, and God is everything, the only way God can increase is to make another one of Him and to let something else also be everything. And so His joy is not limited by the fact that He’s full. His joy continues to increase because there is someone else who is likewise full.

These are Hindu ideas. And their religion, at the deepest level-- when they pick up the *Doctrine and Covenants* and read it, they’re going to say, “Do you see what’s in your scriptures?” And we’ll say, “Yeah, aren’t you supposed to move to Missouri?” [laughter]. So yeah, people will see things we can’t see.

Mormonism announced in its founding book of scripture that it is an incomplete, markedly unfinished religion searching for more truth to achieve its destiny. The completion is to be accomplished primarily by two means: restoring lost scripture and continuing revelation. Of all faiths, Mormonism has the greatest canonical incentive to search for and embrace truth known to others. The keystone of Mormonism is the *Book of Mormon*. That book alerts its readers that there are many others from vastly different places with vastly different scriptures who are nonetheless Christ’s sheep. *Book of Mormon* readers are expected to search for, welcome, and learn from them.

Early in the text we learn that our faith, like our scriptures, is unfinished, and to anticipate a flood of additional sacred texts to help remove our ignorance. The portion of the *Book of Mormon* translated by Joseph Smith is carefully censored with its greatest content withheld.

2 Nephi 29:11-12 states: *“For I command all men, both in the east and in the west, and in the north, and in the south, and in the islands of the sea, that they shall write the words which I shall speak unto them.”* We have no way to define the extent to which that has happened. Nor do we have any concept of the number of sacred records that exist somewhere among unknown others, nor any idea what truths they were given that we lack. Mormonism cannot, or at least should not, consider itself the exclusive possessor of *the* sacred canon or that there is only one canon containing God’s teachings-- the Gods’ teachings. There are words from Heaven spread throughout our world by deliberate planting of the Gods.

Continuing: *“For out of the books which shall be written I will judge the world, every man according to their works, according to that which is written”* [2 Nephi 29:11]. These books hold terrible importance for Mormons because we’re going to be judged by the Gods based on a comparison between our works and that which is written. With such a warning, we Mormons ought to be humble about our claims to know more than other faiths. We should be modest in thinking we are especially graced by the Gods’ words and should be anxious to scour the globe to discover the sacred texts of other cultures. In humility we should invite them to share the truths they value most with us, because we’ve shown that we will respect what they regard as sacred.

To clarify this further, the record continues: *“For behold, I shall speak unto the Jews and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the Nephites and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the other tribes of the house of Israel, which I have led away, and they shall write it”* [2 Nephi 29:12]. The lost ten tribes continue to compose scripture, and the records will, in time, be recovered.

This passage then continues by including yet others who are disconnected from any disclosed connection to Israel. *“And I shall also speak unto all nations of the earth and they shall write it”* [2 Nephi 29:12]. Who, when, and what was said?

“All nations of the earth” is broad enough to raise the troubling possibility that the Gods have spoken to others in India, Japan, and China, to the peoples of Persia, Africa, and native peoples of the Americas, Hawaii, Polynesia, and Australia. Imagining Gods who speak to everyone is troubling enough, but for the Gods to expect Mormons to give high regard, even canonical

credibility to the records of these truly “others,” begins to buckle the knees and mangle the mantras of today’s Mormons.

An unfortunate Mormon truism is the mistaken idea that we have a better and more complete religion than all “others.” We have the most recent revelation because the Gods spoke last to us. (Uh, well, so far as we know.) Perhaps we have no reason to ever consider those outside of Mormonism as less than Mormons or the least worthy before our Gods.

This humbling revelation of the Gods’ universal attention to all mankind is reinforced by Christ’s words to the Nephites at Bountiful. He declared to them in 3 Nephi 16:1-4: *“I have other sheep, which are not of this land, neither of the land of Jerusalem, neither in any parts of that land round about whither I have been to minister.”* His declaration was every bit as disorienting to the Nephites as was His mention of “other sheep” to the Jews.

Both the *Bible* and *Book of Mormon* make it clear that bodies of “sheep” who have the great Shepherd standing before them are perplexed at the idea that He has yet others He loves as much as them. Are there no favorites? The “sheep” probably considered at least passingly, “You must love us best because you’re here visiting us, right?” But any thought that audience was special is dashed by the Lord’s next sentence: *“For they of whom I speak are they who have not as yet heard my voice; neither have I at any time manifested myself unto them. But I have received a commandment of the Father that I shall go unto them, and that they shall hear my voice, and shall be numbered among my sheep, that there may be one fold and one shepherd; therefore I go to show myself unto them”* [3 Nephi 16: 2-3].

Christ was interested in unifying His “sheep.” He sought for one fold that followed only Him. There is no #1 fold among them-- no upper class or special distinct body towering above others. Christ’s visit to the Nephites was over 11 months after His crucifixion. He ministered for 40 days around Jerusalem after His resurrection, but He had nearly 11 months to visit undisclosed “other sheep” before the people of the *Book of Mormon*. For all we know, we have the record of those He visited 10th, maybe 11th. If He took as long with each group as He took with the Nephites, He had time to visit with dozens of other unidentified flocks of His “sheep.”

It’s perhaps a good thing Christ commanded them to write these sayings so we have a record clarifying that “other sheep” are indeed people completely out of view from any scripture in our possession. They exist, they were visited by Christ, they were taught by Him, they recorded what He taught, and we know nothing about any of it, apart from Christ confirming that He did visit and minister to scattered bodies of “other sheep” post-resurrection. He wanted them to become one and understand plain and precious things that have been lost from our present limited version of scripture.

What if the Gods intend to spread knowledge of how to attain divinity among all peoples? That would indeed be a task worthy of the Gods. Consider that for a moment. Have we gentile Mormons been told of God's "other sheep" for some important reason? If so, is it to alert us that we are no more special nor in any greater possession of God's words than many others who have been scattered around the world and are known to the Gods but unidentified to us? Is it to make us more careful about how we regard strangers? Ought it to suggest that there are our religious equals in the world? May it suggest there are perhaps religious superiors in the world? In other words, have we received news of "other sheep" to help keep Mormons humble?

If these words from Christ are not enough to make us cautious about dismissing others, in the book of Alma, there's another reminder of how the Gods deal equally with all mankind. Alma 29:8 states: *"For behold, the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have."* The Lord is concerned about all nations, and not merely Israelites in their scattered condition. Each nation in its own tongue has been given a portion of His teachings. It is measured according to what He seeth fit that they should have.

Everyone is remembered by God, and when you close down revelation you get less. Humble people get more. *"He that will harden his heart, the same receiveth the lesser portion of the word; and he that will not harden his heart, to him is given the greater portion of the word, until it is given unto him to know the mysteries of God until he know them in full"* [Alma 12:10].

It is abundantly clear that Mormons do not know the mysteries of God in full. The farther back we look in human history, the more appears to have been lost. Earlier stages, including the patriarchal era, knew God and therefore understood His path better. How else would Enoch and Melchizedek have achieved their heavenly breakthroughs? We must at least allow for the possibility that there are "other sheep" who are much better informed than are any of us Mormons. The Gods' wise counsel does not regulate dispensing truth on things external to us, but on what is internal to us. We determine whether we have hard hearts or open hearts. One of the ways to determine if our hearts are open and not hard is the degree to which we regard those who are "other"-- not only with respect and charity, but also curiosity.

Mormon revelation helpfully defines knowledge of the Gods' mysteries as "riches." That definition helps explain a prophecy about the coming return of "other sheep." Newly awakened dormant prophets in the north countries will lead scattered flocks to the boundaries of the everlasting hills. They will bring with them "rich treasures unto the children of Ephraim," who will welcome them [D&C 133:26-32]. This will not merely be a reunion, but an exchange of treasured wisdom, or in other words, revelation between those who have preserved sacred

knowledge. That reunion, however, will depend on a body of believing Ephraimites, established in the everlasting hills, that will welcome such riches. These prophetically described people must be humble enough to be taught, and willing to appreciate sacred information from outside. Apparently, all truth can be circumscribed into one great whole.

Why aren't people from around the world eager to teach Mormons? What would it be like if Mormons sent out missionaries to inquire if others had any great truths to share with us? We cannot learn anything new when the only sound in the conversation is our own voice. Mormons are a very hard audience-- hard of both head and heart. Most Mormons "know the church is true," and so what else could possibly matter to them?

It calls to mind Hugh Nibley's observation about BYU students. This is Nibley:

Our search for knowledge should be ceaseless, which means that it is open-ended, never resting on laurels, degrees, or past achievements. "If we get puffed up by thinking that we have much knowledge, we are apt to get a contentious spirit," and what is the cure? "Correct knowledge is necessary to cast out that spirit." The cure for inadequate knowledge is "ever more light and knowledge." But who is going to listen patiently to correct knowledge if he thinks he has the answers already? "There are a great many wise men and women, too, in our midst who are too wise to be taught; therefore, they must die in their own ignorance." "I have tried for a number of years to get the minds of the Saints prepared to receive the things of God; but we frequently see some of them . . . [that] will fly to pieces like glass as soon as anything comes that is contrary to their traditions: they cannot stand the fire at all . . . [If I] go into an investigation into anything that is not contained in the Bible . . . I think there are so many over-wise men here, that they would cry 'treason' and put me to death."

That's Hugh Nibley quoting Joseph Smith. But, he asks:

"Why be so certain that you comprehend the things of God, when all things with you are so uncertain?" True knowledge never shuts the door on more knowledge, but zeal often does. One thinks of the dictum: "We are not seeking for truth at the BYU; we have the truth!" So did Adam and Abraham have the truth, far greater and more truth than what we have, and yet the particular genius of each was that he was constantly "seeking for greater light and knowledge" [See, "Zeal Without Knowledge," originally published in *Dialogue: Journal of Mormon Thought*, Summer 1978, subsequently republished in *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless* (1978)].

I have been greatly impressed with Hinduism. There is a significant overlap in beliefs shared by Mormons and Hindus. Hinduism teaches: *The knowing Self is not born; It does not die. It has not sprung from anything; nothing has sprung from It. Birthless, eternal, everlasting, and ancient, It*

is not killed when the body is killed [S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads*, Katha 1.2.18, (Harper, New York: 1994) p. 73]. This compares interestingly with Joseph Smith's statement found in D&C 93:29: "*Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth was not created or made, neither indeed can be.*"

There may be important potential Hindu contributions on the topic of the eternal nature of man's existence that could be of worth to Mormons—if we did not regard them as deluded pagans. Rather than invite a Hindu over to listen to our family home evening lessons, we may obtain greater benefit by asking them over to teach us a lesson.

Long before the Sermon on the Mount taught us to bless those who curse us, and do good for those who hate us [Matt 5:44], *The Dhammapada* taught: *Let us live in joy, never hating those who hate us.* And when Christ said in that same Sermon on the Mount: "*And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?*" [Matt 7:3], several centuries earlier, the writings of Buddha put it this way: *Do not give your attention to what others do or fail to do; give it to what you do or fail to do.*

What higher light illuminated Buddha when he spoke those words? Was it the same light that illuminated our Lord? Well, our Mormon scripture puts all light and truth into one, singular source for this world. That source is the Son of God.

"For the word of the Lord is truth, and whatsoever is truth is light, and whatsoever is light is Spirit, even the Spirit of Jesus Christ. And the Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world; and the Spirit enlighteneth every man through the world, that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit" [D&C 84:44-46]. Notice this is without any restriction on who can receive the light of the Spirit. "Every man that cometh into the world" receives equally. There is no individual, in any corner of the world, who does not have equal access to obtain "truth" and "light" from that same Source, who is Jesus Christ. If any soul in any age hearkens, or listens and follows the "voice of the Spirit," they are in communication with Jesus Christ. To them He bestows light.

The Gods of Mormonism literally mean it when they proclaim: "*He doeth nothing save it be plain unto the children of men; and he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile"* [2 Ne. 26:33]. All, even those swarthy heathens, are included within the ambit of the Mormon Gods' concern. They speak through the Spirit the same truths to all mankind and have done so since the beginning of creation.

To Mormons the Gods declare: *“I am no respecter of persons”* [D&C 38:16]. To the Hindus the Gods declare: *“None are less dear to me and none are more dear”* [*The Bhagavad Gita*]. Both the Mormon and Hindu Gods respect all mankind equally-- that means all mankind, including the heathen. And none are above others.

We are here to learn. We should rejoice at any chance the Gods give to us to become better informed about Their mysteries. The truth, or rich treasures, from around the world will come to those who welcome it.

One of Islam’s great thinkers taught: *“We ought not be embarrassed of appreciating the truth and of obtaining it wherever it comes from, even if it comes from races distant and nations different from us. Nothing should be dearer to the seeker of truth than the truth itself, and there is no deterioration of the truth, nor belittling either of one who speaks it or conveys it”* [From Abu Yusuf Ya’qub ibn ‘Isaq as-Sabbah al-Kindi (“al-Kindi”) (801-873), known as the father of Islamic or Arab philosophy].

There is a Cherokee prayer: *“Oh Great Spirit, help me always to speak the truth quietly, to listen with an open mind when others speak, and to remember the peace that may be found in silence.”* We speak too much and too loudly, and we listen too little.

We must return to the innocent, child-like quest for the truth where “others” are not dreaded but welcomed with curiosity. We should attract, not repel others by the interest we have for discovering truth, whatever truth they have to offer. Plato observed: *“We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy is when men are afraid of the light.”*

There are indeed “other sheep” who belong to God; they should be welcomed, not scorned. If we do our part, we can awaken and arise and seek for a covenant from God, and then receive in turn from Them “rich treasures” of knowledge. In their present form, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Taoism have not preserved a Christ-centered tradition. Perhaps if we were to recover earlier writings from these faiths in an unaltered form we would find Christological centers were once part of them all. The post-resurrection visit to the Nephites suggests that possibility.

Because of its self-declared lack, the original version of Mormonism, with its confidence and curiosity, remains the *only* faith with any potential to unite within it all truth; therefore, by extension, the unrealized potential to also unite all people.

MAN 3: So you talked about finding truth in other cultures, other religions. You also touched on the idea that there may be truth, but there’s also error, in all other religions. So what keys of knowledge, what tools do you use to help discern between truth and error?

DENVER: The most correct measuring stick, in my view, is the *Book of Mormon*. And as long as you have the *Book of Mormon* you have the ability to make a comparison. And if something reaffirms something I find there, then I regard that as having passed the test. If it contradicts that, then I regard that as having failed the test. And if it harmonizes with it, but it extends it beyond anything known to me, then I've got something to pray about. Because the ultimate arbiter of truth is God.

The foregoing are excerpts from Denver's extemporaneous remarks made during a meeting of the *Christian Reformation Lectures* planning committee on March 4th, 2017, and from the presentation of Denver's paper entitled "Other Sheep Indeed," given at the Sunstone Symposium on July 29, 2017.