

## Podcast Episode 45: Denying the Power

**QUESTION: In 1820, God told Joseph Smith not to join any church because they all “have a form of godliness, but deny the power thereof.” How do churches today still deny the power of godliness, and how is God working to help us grasp the depth of our awful situation?**

---

DENVER: I think that you can be a Mormon Community of Christ member, a Mormon Latter-Day Saint, a Mormon in some of these rare splinter cults— I’m an independent, freelance, converted-to-my-soul believer in the Book of Mormon and the value of the Book of Mormon, without any denominational affiliation. I believe to my core that the Book of Mormon is the keystone to *a* religion, but I’m not sure it is the keystone to the religion that they practice in Salt Lake City anymore. I’m not sure it’s the keystone to the religion that’s practiced in some of these splinter groups. I don’t know enough about the Community of Christ to be able to evaluate that, but in June of this year I went to a conference in Boise, Idaho. I spoke there, and I heard from a group. These were— There was a member of a presidency and a seventy who had previously been members of the Community of Christ, and they had split primarily over the issue of the standing of the Book of Mormon; they had formed something that they called the Remnant Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. And their chief objection, according to these authorities from that group, was that the Book of Mormon was not being held in the kind of esteem with which that they would like to hold the Book of Mormon. Therefore, they considered their version of what they were doing to be more genuine, better, and what have you.

I’m to the point where I believe truth is truth. I believe the Book of Mormon has value. And I’m tired of the peephole mentality where “I want to see the Restoration, Joseph, and the Book of Mormon through this lens, and anything that falls outside of that lens in corrupt, is to be opposed.” I don’t understand why we’re fighting. I don’t understand why we’re competitive! If you can teach me something about the Old Testament that I do not know, I want to hear it. If you can teach me something about the New Testament that I don’t know, I would love to learn about it. If you’ve got some insight into the Book of Mormon that can expand my understanding and appreciation of it, I would love for you to give that to me.

And I have to tell you, the Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is a mess. I mean, to put it mildly, it’s a mess. It does not reflect the voice of God to Joseph Smith in the way in which the voice of God came to Joseph Smith. When the revelations of Joseph were sent for publication in what would have been called the

Book of Commandments, printed in Independence, Missouri, Oliver Cowdery and William Phelps felt that they had the editorial right (Oliver believed this because of some things that had been said to him in revelation) the editorial right to make changes and alter the text. And they felt comfortable doing that.

The Book of Commandments got— The press got wrecked by a mob, and so, although a handful of the manuscript printed sheets got salvaged and they got put together, the Book of Commandments got superseded by the 1835 publication in Kirtland of the Doctrine and Covenants. During the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants publication, Joseph Smith undertook to take the *Lectures on Faith* (that had been delivered at the School of the Prophets in Kirtland) to turn that into a standardized text that could be used elsewhere for instruction and understanding of doctrine. And so in Joseph Smith's journals, he enters comments about the labor he was doing to get the *Lectures on Faith* prepared for publication. Everything else that went into the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants had been turned over to a committee. And the committee took what the Book of Commandments had done, and then the committee (now including Sidney Rigdon, among other), took and expanded and expanded— Section 27 of the Doctrine of Covenants in the LDS version is a vast expansion of something that was originally very small, like I think four verses. And it's now like 35 verses.

Joseph Smith, when the Doctrine and Covenants was presented to the conference in 1835 for a sustaining vote as a statement of the religion, personally vouched for *Lectures on Faith*, and signed his name attesting to it being true and accurate, and he would answer for anything that is contained within that text. And the rest of the book was sustained by people as a standard of the faith and accepted, but Joseph made no such vouching for the balance of it. And the balance of it contained expansions, changes, deletions, improvements, as folks thought that they were making.

Today if I were a gospel doctrine teacher in an LDS church, I would teach people how to parse this book in order to get back to where it ought to be. I would be unfit for the ministry, because I'd be subversive.

The truth is oftentimes very subversive, because people really like to take textual material that's considered authoritative and to wrap themselves in the cloak of that authority, in order to justify the agenda that they would like to advance. Sometimes the reasons people do that are noble. Sometimes the reasons they do that are laudable.

When Martin Luther was confronted by a corrupt Catholic church, the problem that Martin Luther had to solve was how you could have salvation while you depart from the

authoritative hierarchical structure. How do you get salvation and authoritative baptism without priestly authority, because the tradition that had been handed down for a millenium and a half—and this was 1517 when Martin Luther finally reaches the point that he splits—how do you survive that split if authority to seal on earth and in heaven, if authority to baptize remains with the Catholic church, and they excommunicate you. How does salvation itself survive? The way that Martin Luther solved the riddle that allowed him to make the split—noble as that split may have been, laudable and as good as it may be that he took the step—was to take one of the letters of Paul in the book of Romans and to take the phrase of “salvation by grace” and to wrap himself in the authority of the words (that appear in the book of Romans) to vindicate the split to say salvation can be attained independent of the hierarchy, independent of the priesthood, independent of the ability claimed by the Pope and his priests to seal on earth, to forgive sins, to do what they do to minister in the gospel. And we have a chance, by the grace of God, to lay hold upon salvation and to make our way back to redemption independent of that structure. Martin Luther, bless his heart, created the rationalization that allowed John Knox and John Calvin and Zwingli and the other protestant reformers, in one generation, to split into numerous different protestant congregations. Just that quick—one generation. Those men met with each other.

So then we get all the way down to the Restoration through Joseph Smith, when Joseph is troubling over which church, which branch ought he join. I mean, everyone knew in Colonial America that Catholics were wrong because the protestant reformation had succeeded in getting a toe hold in the Americas as an escape from the religious oppression of Europe. They were burning people at the stake; they were killing people over religious issues at the time that the colonies were founded.

One of the things that the Constitution wanted to do was to divorce federal power from religious power. And when the Bill of Rights was adopted, the very first one was to guarantee religious independence so that people could think. So Joseph could rest assured that you don't even need to trouble yourself over Catholicism, but as to everything else that was out there, “Which of all the churches ought I to join?” And the answer that he got was that, “Don't join any of them. They teach for commandments the doctrines of men; they have a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.”

What do you think it means that religions *deny the power of godliness*? If you're open to it, it puts you right back where I was, sitting on a bed in a barracks, talking to God and getting answers, because God is willing to be a lively participant in a living religion in which you and He, together, are part of the living gospel of Christ.

The religion that Joseph Smith restored was intended to have a powerful form of godliness. Something that God only changes you and changes the landscape inside of you, but ultimately is intended to change this world; ultimately is intended to bring again something like the Garden of Eden.

In the letter Joseph Smith wrote to the publisher of *The Democrat*, the portion of which is now the “Articles of Faith”— John Wentworth had sent a letter to Joseph; Joseph responded; he described the faith— Joseph said that we believe that there was going to come a time when there would be a Zion that would be built upon this, the American Continent, and that the earth was going to be renewed and returned again to its paradisiacal glory.

I mean, think for a minute about what happened at the Fall. At the moment in which the Fall occurs, the harmony that once existed between this creation, man, and God was fractured. And man is sent out to labor by the sweat of their brow. Well, that fracturing in the Joseph Smith translation version of the book of Genesis— It’s in the Joseph Smith translation that’s used by the Community of Christ; it’s in the Pearl of Great Price as the book of Moses in the LDS scriptures— In that account there comes a moment when Enoch is caught up in the Heaven, and Enoch has this visionary experience, and he sees what’s going on on the earth, and he’s lamenting, and he wants to know when the earth is going to have the Lord come and visit it and redeem it. And the earth itself, in this vision, mourns over the wickedness that is upon her face. She wants that to be cleansed.

That vision of Enoch suggests that this earth is sentient; this earth has a spirit; this earth is alive. If this earth mourns over the wickedness that is upon her face, she’s literally talking about something as intimate to her as your face is to you. If you can sense it, when there’s something—a fly, a mosquito, something that happens, a leaf brushes up against your face, the wind blows—if you can sense that on your face, and the earth is mourning the wickedness of men that’s upon her, how must the earth be responding to the way in which men behave?

Does any man or woman have any business to look at another person on the basis on how they believe in these things and to judge and dismiss them? Do we have any right to treat one another as if we are in hostile camps? If we believe that something happened with Joseph Smith, and if we believe that the Book of Mormon is a gift given us for God, and if a person can get closer to God by abiding its precepts than any other book, then we outta celebrate whenever anyone says something laudable, [praiseworthy], noble, or enlightening concerning the restoration and the Book of Mormon.

I am shocked at how bad a job we've all done with the history of the Restoration and the history of Joseph Smith. Right now the LDS church is in the process of publishing the Joseph Smith Papers. When they come out I read them cover to cover like you're reading a novel. My set of these books, I don't know how many— They're in the teens now— but my set of these books has cross references, interlineations, I point out where the historian's office is making a mistake because it's contradicted by something that's in an earlier volume. They're not keeping their version of the story straight, but they are publishing source materials. Source materials, if you focus on them, will give you a much better view of what was going on.

The fact that Bryce tells a story that's preserved within the Community of Christ tradition-history of Joseph Smith III about Emma's insistence— If you read the source material, you realize that as between the two of them, Emma Smith was the stronger personality. Emma Smith was the one who provided for Joseph a backbone, a stability. Emma was better educated than Joseph. Joseph not only loved her; he prized her. He deferred to her. He sought counsel from her. The relationship between Joseph and Emma Smith is *not at all* what is portrayed in Salt Lake City. They *do not* understand the relation between Joseph and his wife, Emma. And the stories that are told there, and retold there, based upon third and fourth-hand accounts, some of which are summoned 40 years after the fact in order to support the institution that is in a death grip with the United States over the issue of plural wifery—and I'm expected to trust a 40-year late reminiscence about Joseph's behavior in Nauvoo, Illinois at a time when litigation is trying to confiscate all of the property belonging to the institution of the LDS church, and the LDS church needs this supporting material in order to justify the changes, the aberrations that they have adopted to Mormonism?

There are a couple of really well-known, well-respected Latter-day Saint historical writers that I've crossed paths with. I won't drop names—that just seems unseemly to me. But both of these—one's called the "Dean of LDS Historians" as a nickname—one of these fellows and I were talking about the subject of plural marriage and Joseph and all that. I posed the question to both of these fellows, "If you take Joseph from the time of his birth to the date of his death, and you say we're going to draw a line right here (it's going to be on June 27th of 1844) and you're going to look at everything that existed in written form that had been preserved through that moment in time, and you just stop the record right there at that moment, can you unequivocally state there is evidence that Joseph Smith had another wife other than Emma Smith?"

Now, understand, these people are well enough acquainted with the body of the original source material— Most people are not well enough acquainted with that. Even the

revelation that purportedly occurred in Section 132, which is the big revelation that justifies it, is not in the handwriting of a clerk that wrote for Joseph Smith as a scribe. It's in the handwriting of a fellow who worked at the store who was never a scribe, who claims that he copied from the journal of Joseph's scribe at the time. It's a copy of a document that got destroyed, so we can't put that document before this date. And it didn't even come to light until some time 1852, okay? It could have been created in 1850, 51, 52. Could've been created after June 27th. If you stop the clock right there, and you say, "What does the history of Joseph Smith reveal about that topic?" Both of these fellows said, "Okay, I see where you're coming from. Okay, yeah, I get it. I just don't believe it." Tradition and peepholes are really difficult for people to part with.

When you have been muzzled into a paradigm that says, It is this way; it can be no other way— We are just as apt as the protestant folly because the Lord wasn't commenting to Joseph about the Catholics. He was talking about the protestants. We are just as apt as they were after Joseph had explored the various alternatives, to have God say concerning us now today, *we* teach for doctrines the commandments of men; *we* have a form of godliness; but *we* deny the power thereof; and that *our* hearts are far from Him.

If your heart is close to God, it also tends to be open to your fellow man. I wish that we felt no insecurities about our own beliefs and were willing to say, "I'm prepared to revise what I believe if you can give me reason to do so." I welcome, want; I hunger, and I thirst after knowledge of things that are true.

I wrote a book called *Passing the Heavenly Gift*, in which I analyzed the history of the Restoration from the vantage point of using what the Book of Mormon says the Latter-day gentiles are going to do. I didn't approach it as if I were a historian. I approached it as if I were trying to understand what the prophets in the Book of Mormon said the gentiles were going to do with the restoration of the gospel, and I posed the question, "What would that history look like?" On the assumption the Book of Mormon is telling us what the gentiles were going to do with it, I wrote a history that said "This event means this part of the prophecy of the Book of Mormon was filled. This event means what Christ said concerning the Latter-day gentiles was vindicated. This event is immediately following God telling you what the evidence, what the sign would be, and so this should be understood historically as fulfillment of God's sign."

And by the time I finished writing that history and got it out into print, what has been going on in Salt Lake did not appear to be all that praiseworthy from Heaven's perspective. It appeared to be a shabby decay and a ruin. It appeared to be the very spot in which God said, "After they've done this, I'm then going to breathe new life into it again. I am going to

bring again Zion.” The problem with the book is, if you believe that all members of your organization ought to be minions holding up a pyramid, atop which sits one guy at the pinnacle who has the authority, like the Pope, to bind on earth and in heaven, and everyone ought to be submissive and supportive, then that kind of history-telling becomes threatening.

I was given the ultimatum that I either had to take that book out of print, or I would be excommunicated. For a whole host of reasons, including the fact that I have a publisher, I have a contract with the publisher, I went to the publisher and said, “I’m being given an ultimatum, it needs to be taken off.” He said, “Well if the church is opposed to it, it’s a good book to keep in print. So no, we’re going to keep this book in print.” So then I was told that since the publisher was interested in keeping it in print, they would be willing to purchase the copyright to the book. And so I went back to the publisher, and I said, “What would it take to buy the copyright from you for this book?” And the fellow’s reaction was, “You are shitting me!” (I mean, I’m quoting him, so don’t fault me for his language.) He said, “If they’re that interested in buying and getting it out, this book *has* to stay in print! This is Martin Luther, this is Galileo, this is historic! We have to keep this— No. No amount of money!” I said, “Well, okay. I don’t want to be in the middle of a lawsuit, but....”

As I thought about the reaction, it struck me that it really doesn’t matter if the book ever has wide appreciation. The book has depth of meaning. It’s not important that you influence millions of people casually. But it is a wonderful thing if you can influence a single soul deeply.

Christ’s ministry was relatively modest in it’s accomplishment in terms of the people He influenced directly. By the time what Christ had founded had widespread political, economic, and even military influence, it had become so corrupted that Christianity itself was more political than it was religious. Today we have over 100 different denominations that claim Joseph Smith as the founder. But the fact is that precious few people have allowed the message of the Book of Mormon, that was intended to redeem not only latter-day gentiles but to redeem a remnant of the natives that were on this continent, and to ultimately redeem some of the Jews that remain as a remnant and to bring them together in a cause that will make the earth herself rejoice because wickedness has ceased from off her face.

If anyone can grasp the depth of what the Lord complained about—a form of godliness but deny the power thereof— If there’s one piece of lifeline that God has extended to us in our day to get us out of that decrepit condition, it’s the Book of Mormon. We share that across all of the fractured parts of the Restoration, wherever it is. I know that the Book of Mormon

contains valuable, indispensable prizes that have been given to us by God. I know that because I've lived it, and therefore, I look at the Book of Mormon as more miracle than mere text.

I know that Joseph Smith was singularly called by God, not merely as just another protestant leader, but as a founder of something that was intended to retain vitality and godliness in a power that can change absolutely the destinies of where we're headed in eternity and the heart that we have within us. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

-----

The foregoing message from Denver is taken from the second half of his lecture entitled "Remembering the New Covenant," given on November 10, 2018 at Graceland University in Lamoni, Iowa.