

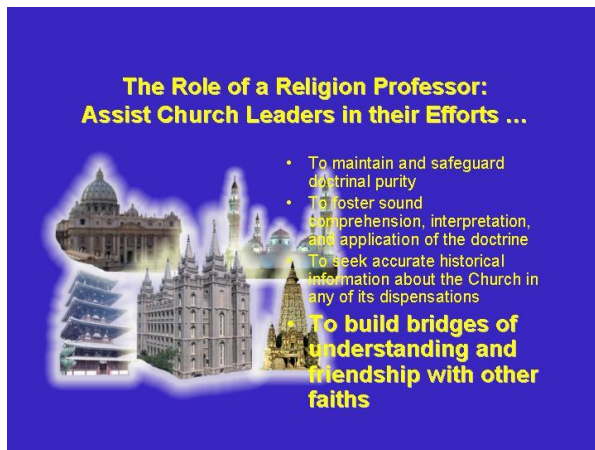
False Images of Christ

by Marcus H. Martins, Ph.D.

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As I pondered on what to share with you today, my mind turned to a topic that has concerned me for quite some time, that of “false images of Christ.” Yet, the nature of both the subject and my insights demand a few words of explanation on why I am bringing this topic to you. So, as a preface to my remarks I will clarify my role as a religion professor. It is quite possible that many in the Church might have an unclear idea of what the work and role of a religion professor is supposed to be, or what distinguishes a religion professor from a seminary or institute teacher.

Unlike seminary and institute teachers, religion professors at the Church's institutions of higher learning are required—like all other full-time faculty members—to engage in scholarly and creative work that will support and strengthen my teaching. That means that as a religion professor I'm expected to engage in intellectual activities conducted with scientific rigor, thoroughness, and professionalism, meant to develop fresh insights that will refine the current understanding of the doctrines and principles of the gospel; or that will help clarify and expand the application of existing doctrines and principles to modern-day issues, circumstances, or predicaments in all areas of human endeavor—either social, economic, political, or scientific. Religion professors are also required to engage in intellectual exchanges with fellow scholars in religion and other disciplines, and to introduce their work in their classes, in formal Church meetings, professional conferences, scholarly and lay publications.



Because the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is guided by divine revelation, its religion scholars do not develop new doctrines, principles nor commandments. Instead, I see the role of a religion professor being that of supporting the First Presidency, the Quorum of the Twelve, and other general, area, and local authorities of the Church in their efforts to maintain and safeguard doctrinal purity, to foster sound comprehension, interpretation, and application of those doctrines, to seek accurate historical information about the Church in any of its dispensations, and to build

bridges of understanding and friendship with other faiths.

By doing these things we will accomplish some of the educational goals of the university, which are to help our students learn the truths of the gospel, gain or strengthen a testimony of Jesus Christ and his Church, live righteous lives, and serve others.

With this vision of my duties and role in mind, I will now explain my theme. For quite some time I have been concerned with a few somewhat recent trends that in my view have the potential to severely damage a person's true faith in Christ.

The prophet Joseph Smith explained the following about true faith:

“[Three] things are necessary in order that any rational and intelligent being may exercise faith in God unto life and salvation. First, the idea that he actually exists. Secondly, a correct idea of his character, perfections, and attributes. Thirdly, an actual knowledge that the course of life which he is pursuing is according to his will. ... [Without] an acquaintance with these three important facts, the faith of every rational being must be imperfect and unproductive; but with this understanding it can become perfect and fruitful, abounding in righteousness ...” (Lectures on Faith, p.13)

I would like to call your attention to the second requirement mentioned by the prophet Joseph Smith: “... a correct idea of [the Lord’s] character, perfections, and attributes.” Based on this statement, we see that any attempt to portray or describe the Lord in an inaccurate manner would cause the individual to develop or exercise faith unproductively—meaning that despite his or her belief, without a correct knowledge of God’s character and attributes such individuals could end up nurturing expectations of blessings that would never be fulfilled, which would generate frustration and disappointments.

In recent years I have noticed a trend of replacing correct notions about the Savior Jesus Christ with what I call “images.” Some of you may ask why I titled my talk “False Images of Christ” instead of “false christs.” The different title refers to what I see as the creation and dissemination not of false christs in the traditional sense, but of “images,” or human fabrications designed to



replace the original, but not necessarily in its totality. In other words, these images of Christ bear a few of the characteristics and attributes of the real Christ, but not all of them. And in addition, these images add other character traits that insofar as the currently available scriptures reveal, were not part of the Savior’s perfect personality.

I will discuss three of these false “images” of Christ: (1) the Social Reformer; (2) the Motivator; and (3) the Divine Peer.

All of these images have the following common features: (a) they isolate or focus on specific consequences of the influence of Jesus Christ in human affairs; (b) they only slightly, if ever, fully acknowledge the source of that influence, which is Christ’s divinity; and consequently (c) they fail to provide the reverent adoration befitting a member of the godhead. If you recall the prophet Joseph Smith’s testimony of his first vision, you will remember the Savior’s evaluation of the then existing creeds of the world: “... they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.” (Joseph Smith-History 1:19)

False Image #1: The Social Reformer

One day in November of 1978 I taught the first missionary discussion to a bright young man who seemed to have many questions about God and religion. As my companion and I sat down with him to discuss such matters, he stated: “I can only believe in a god that is just like me—imperfect and fallible. Any other conception of a god is unacceptable to me.” Today, almost 30 years later, a growing number of theologians and other biblical scholars have been actively trying to discredit scriptural texts, and by employing deconstructionism, they try to reduce the Savior to the level of a mere controversial social reformer, with less-than-divine powers and roles.

While it is true that the scriptures are incomplete and that dozens of texts of questionable authenticity exist, we have contemporary testimonies of latter-day apostles and prophets concerning Jesus Christ. Instead of searching the imaginary personage commonly called by scholars “the historical Jesus” one needs to look no further than the testimony of the prophet Joseph Smith to find the true Christ in all his majesty and glory. The Savior that the Latter-day Saints believe in is not some ambiguous or controversial figure from the ancient world. He is, in the words of angels and prophets, “... the Lord God Omnipotent who reigneth, who was, and is from all eternity to all eternity ...” (Mosiah 3:5; 5:15), or as described by Isaiah, he is the “Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6)

To the current effort to mythologize the scriptures and attribute Christ’s miracles and his resurrection to deceptions created in the first century, we respond with the testimonies contained in the Book of Mormon and in the Doctrine and Covenants. In Mormon’s summary of the Savior’s three-day ministry to the Nephites and Lamanites after his resurrection, we read that about 2,500 individuals “... went forth, and thrust their hands into his side, and did feel the prints of the nails in his hands and in his feet; and this they did do, going forth one by one until they had all gone forth, and did see with their eyes and did feel with their hands, and did know of a surety and did bear record, that it was he, of whom it was written by the prophets, that should come.” (3 Nephi 11:15)

And in our era the prophet Joseph Smith and brother Sidney Rigdon testified the following: “And we beheld the glory of the Son, on the right hand of the Father, and received of his fulness; ... And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him: That he lives! For we saw him, even on the right hand of God; and we heard the voice bearing record that he is the Only Begotten of the Father—That by him, and through him, and of him, the worlds are and were created, and the inhabitants thereof are begotten sons and daughters unto God.” (Doctrine & Covenants 76:20, 22-24)

False Image #2: The Motivator

We live in days where seemingly everything can be offered to the masses in the form of entertainment. Even history is presented in sanitized, dramatized, romanticized versions, palatable to a public that is so immersed in the complexities of modern life that it appears too tired to deal with complex issues from the past. Sometimes I wonder if contemporary audiences really believe that in the old days people stopped their daily activities every 6 minutes or so in order to sing and dance. That reminds me of writer Issac Asimov’s suggestion that apocryphal

histories are more appealing than reality. (*Science, numbers, and I.* Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday. 1968. Page 29)

This tendency to romanticize or dramatize has also crept into the world of religion and sacred texts, perhaps as a side-effect of the deconstruction process we just discussed. And this is the trend I call “popularization of divinity.” By “popularization” I mean the transformation of our Lord and Redeemer into a glorified motivational speaker: sweet, poetic, uttering shallow and bland slogans that could very well have been created by advertising executives or amateur psychologists. Bringing to the world a message aimed at building one’s self-esteem by avoiding hard and uncomfortable issues such as eternal laws, the seriousness of sin, the unbending nature of justice, and the pain of repentance.

What we call “the restored gospel” is more than just a philosophy of life designed to make people “feel good.” This gospel may be said to be composed of the following elements: doctrines & principles; laws, covenants and ordinances; and standards. Let me propose to you a few definitions for these concepts and explain the relationship among them, and as I do this I hope to explain why the false image of the Savior as a motivator is problematic.

Using dictionary definitions as a basis, we may define “doctrines” as systematized statements of the principles upon which the Lord establishes his courses of action and commandments. “Principles” could be defined as fundamental truths from which a number of other truths are derived.

The doctrine of Christ was set forth by the Savior himself in the Book of Mormon:

“Behold, verily, verily, I say unto you, I will declare unto you my doctrine. And this is my doctrine, and it is the doctrine which the Father hath given unto me; and I bear record of the Father, and the Father beareth record of me, and the Holy Ghost beareth record of the Father and me; and I bear record that the Father commandeth all men, everywhere, to repent and believe in me.

“And whoso believeth in me, and is baptized, the same shall be saved; and they are they who shall inherit the kingdom of God. And whoso believeth not in me, and is not baptized, shall be damned.

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, that this is my doctrine, and I bear record of it from the Father; and whoso believeth in me believeth in the Father also; and unto him will the Father bear record of me, for he will visit him with fire and with the Holy Ghost. And thus will the Father bear record of me, and the Holy Ghost will bear record unto him of the Father and me; for the Father, and I, and the Holy Ghost are one.

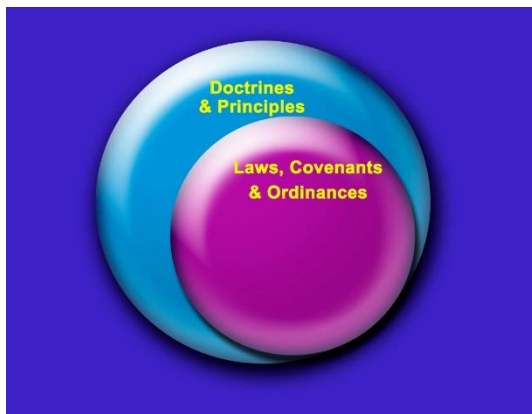
“And again I say unto you, ye must repent, and become as a little child, and be baptized in my name, or ye can in nowise receive these things. And again I say unto you, ye must repent, and be baptized in my name, and become as a little child, or ye can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God.

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, that this is my doctrine, and whoso buildeth upon this buildeth upon my rock, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against them.

“And whoso shall declare more or less than this, and establish it for my doctrine, the same cometh of evil, and is not built upon my rock; but he buildeth upon a sandy foundation, and the gates of hell stand open to receive such when the floods come and the winds beat upon them.” (3 Nephi 11:31-40)

And as far as principles, consider these words from the Prophet Joseph Smith:

“The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it. But in connection with these, we believe in the gift of the Holy Ghost, the power of faith, the enjoyment of the spiritual gifts according to the will of God, the restoration of the house of Israel, and the final triumph of truth.” (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p.121)

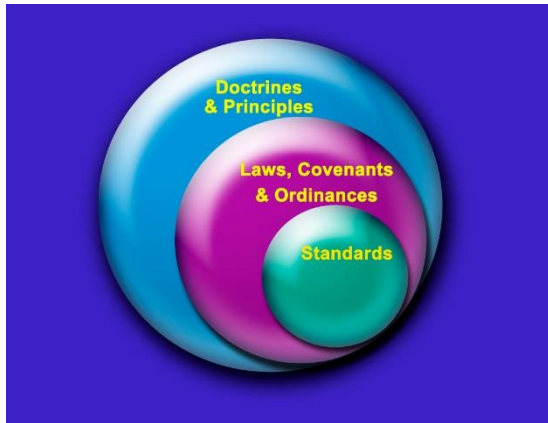


Growing out of these doctrines and principles we have laws, covenants, and ordinances. Laws are divine requirements and expectations revealed by the Lord to his living prophets. These requirements and expectations are then proposed to the Church in formal assemblies, where by means of specific ordinances administered by authorized priesthood holders, Church members make solemn covenants to accept and obey such laws.

For example, the Lord revealed to the prophet Joseph Smith the commandment to take upon ourselves the name of Christ, to always remember him, and to keep his commandments. This divine requirement is accepted by Church members by means of a covenant first made in the ordinance of baptism and later renewed most Sundays of each year through the ordinance of the sacrament.

Failure to obey these laws and receive these ordinances and covenants will bring a tragic disappointment in the next life. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught: “If men would acquire salvation, they have got to be subject, before they leave this world, to certain rules and principles, which were fixed by an unalterable decree before the world was. The disappointment of hopes and expectations at the resurrection would be indescribably dreadful.” (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p.324)

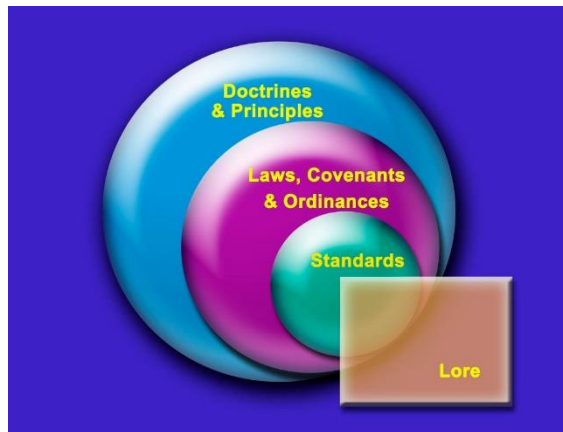
Covenants are so central to our salvation and exaltation that Nephi was warned by an angel that one day the great and abominable church—in an effort to “... pervert the right ways of the Lord, [and] ... blind the eyes and harden the hearts of the children of men”—would take away from the scriptures many covenants of the Lord (see 1 Nephi 13:26-27).



As a resource to help us live in harmony with the laws and covenants, and prepare us for ordinances, the Church has what we call “standards.” These may be defined as sets of behavioral rules, patterns, and boundaries instituted by living prophets and at times by properly authorized local and family leaders.

For example, a few months ago our prophet, President Gordon B. Hinckley, instituted a specific standard dealing with body piercing and tattoos.

Since the beginning of the Church prophets have instituted and made changes or kept unaltered a number of standards for dress and grooming, dating, dancing, manners and etiquette in Church meetings, activities, etc. Under the direction of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve, area presidencies may fine-tune some of these standards to take into account local or national cultural patterns regarding marriages, specific legislations, etc. Following the standards instituted by formal Church authorities, families may also institute standards for their own homes, which will deal with family meetings, dress and grooming and other behaviors in the home, acceptable activities on the Sabbath, and so on.



In addition to doctrines, principles, laws, covenants, ordinances, and standards, we find another common element—but this one not originated on high, but instead originated on the moral agency which the Lord gave unto every human being (Doctrine & Covenants 101:78). I call this element “lore,” and it includes morals, aphorisms, sayings, slogans, clichés, stereotypes, and even banalities spread by word of mouth or other means of social exchange. A number of these display some degree of harmony with divine laws and Church standards—and these we might categorize as those the Lord referred to when he commanded

us to “... seek ... out of the best books words of wisdom ...” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:118) However, others may contradict gospel doctrines and standards in some degree.

Let me give you a popular example of one such disagreement: One day I was at the home of very kind and faithful Latter-day Saint friends. As I glanced around their room I noticed a beautiful flier with the saying: “*I never said it would be easy; I only said it would be worth it.*” The pronoun in the sentence suggested that those words would have been declared by the Savior. I pointed to my host that in reality the Savior had never expressed the idea that living the gospel wouldn’t be easy, but instead he had stated: “... my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:30) My host then stated: “You’re right. The Savior said the opposite.” But after a moment the person added: “But the statement is so beautiful ... I’ll keep it where it is.” With that reply, I didn’t say another word.

Another example is the popular heart-warming allegory titled “*Footprints on the Sand*,” which attempts to convey the not-entirely-accurate idea that the Lord will literally carry his children in his arms in times of trouble and adversity. In reality, the Lord never promised to exempt us from the challenges of mortality. To do so, would require a violation of some of the very purposes of mortal life. He will support, strengthen, and encourage his children, and with his divine assistance we will overcome the adversities of life.

Just because an account sounds believable, poetic, or heart-warming, it doesn’t mean that it is doctrinally accurate. And if a doctrinally inaccurate idea is used as “faith-promoting,” what kind of faith would it promote?

At this point some might ask: “But didn’t the Savior himself use parables and allegories?” And the response would be, “Yes, he did.” But if we notice the way the Savior enunciated his parables it is clear that he was not portraying those events as if they actually took place. Instead, the Lord drew attention to the symbolic meaning of the elements, circumstances, and actions in the parables. And in no known instance a parable had the Savior himself or his Father as characters.

The adoption of ideas and concepts that sound sweet and poetic, but that are out of harmony with the doctrines of the restored gospel, reduces Christ and his gospel to the level of another of the philosophies of men. If an account of a seemingly spiritual experience is in part or altogether fictional, no faith toward salvation can be exercised, and a misguided hope that such fictional events might one day take place will certainly lead to frustration and sorrow.

I also want to clarify that I am not teaching against the use of true, documented historical and scriptural accounts. But whenever we use those, we should consider the following words from the Prophet Joseph Smith:

“Reading the experience of others, or the revelation given to them, can never give us a comprehensive view of our condition and true relation to God. Knowledge of these things can only be obtained by experience through the ordinances of God set forth for that purpose.” (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p.324)

So, the study of historical accounts and the experiences and testimonies of others is important because they introduce “legal precedents” of blessings that we may, through the exercise of faith, obtain for ourselves by means of the ordinances instituted for their bestowal. These blessings will in turn produce salvation—not only the ultimate eternal salvation, but temporal salvation from the evils, illnesses, and troubles of the mortal state.

False Image #3: The Divine Peer

This last image in my discussion has to do with the use of the terms “friend” and “Elder Brother” when referring to the Savior. It is not as serious as the first two images, because in its essence it is not a false image. But I want to point out that the potential for misuse makes this image of Christ a reason for careful consideration.

I believe that most—if not all—individuals are well-intentioned when they use these words, doing so as a means of expressing their love for the Savior. However, in the scriptures we find no support to this practice. On the contrary, even during his mortal ministry the Savior maintained a reverent “social distance” between him and his disciples.

For example, when he decided to pay the temple tribute using miraculous means, he told Peter to give the money “... for me and thee.” (Matthew 17:27) After his resurrection he asked Mary Magdalene to tell the disciples: “... I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.” (John 20:17)

Elder James E. Talmage explained:

“It is notable that He did not say ‘for us.’ In His associations with men, even with the Twelve, who of all were nearest and dearest to Him, our Lord always maintained His separate and unique status, in every instance making the fact apparent that He was essentially different from other men. This is illustrated by His expressions ‘My Father and your Father,’ ‘My God and your God,’ instead of our Father and our God. He reverently acknowledged that He was the Son of God in a literal sense that did not apply to any other being.” (*Jesus the Christ*, p.356)

When the risen Savior appeared to the Nephites and Lamanites, Nephi, who had by then been the Lord’s living prophet for three decades greeted him by prostrating himself and kissing the Lord’s feet (3 Nephi 11:19). A number of our Lamanite and Nephite brothers and sisters who were healed by the Savior at that momentous occasion did the same thing (3 Nephi 17:10). When the prophet Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon saw the vision of the kingdoms of glory, they testified that before the Lord “... all things bow in humble reverence, and give him glory forever and ever.” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:93) In my mind these examples describe the kind of relationship we have with the Savior. In his goodness and mercy he may call us “friends” while we—just like the apostle Thomas—in reverent acknowledgment, respectfully call him “My Lord and my God.” (John 20:28) Even the holy angels who live in the presence of God (Doctrine & Covenants 76:21; 130:6-7) respectfully refer to him as “Lord.”

In the scriptures we find a number of instances where the Lord called “his friends” prophets, apostles, or some of the Elders of his Church who had dedicated their entire lives and livelihoods to the service of the kingdom (see James 2:23; Doctrine and Covenants 45:52; 84:63; 88:3; 93:45-46; 94:1; 97:1; 98:1; 103:1; 104:1; 105:26). These examples clearly show that it is the Lord who initiates the use of the term “friend.” Impure lips do not declare this friendship. Hopefully, all of us will strive to live worthy enough to be called by him, his friends.



And as far as the use of the correct title "Elder Brother," here is what the living prophets in 1916 taught the Church in a joint-statement:

"There is no impropriety ... in speaking of Jesus Christ as the Elder Brother of the rest of human kind. ... Let it not be forgotten, however, that He is essentially greater than any and all others ..."
(Messages of the First Presidency 5:34; June 30, 1916)

In a missionary satellite broadcast in 1998, Elder M. Russell Ballard, of the Twelve, explained the following:

"We occasionally hear some members refer to Jesus as our Elder Brother, which is a true concept based on our understanding of the premortal life with our Father in Heaven. But like many points of gospel doctrine, that simple truth doesn't go far enough in terms of describing the Savior's role in our present lives and His great position as a member of the Godhead.

"Thus, some non-LDS Christians are uncomfortable with what they perceive as a secondary role for Christ in our theology. They feel that we view Jesus as a spiritual peer. They believe that we view Christ as an implementer ... for God but that we don't view Him as God to us and to all mankind ...

"... We can understand why some Latter-day Saints have tended to focus on Christ's Sonship as opposed to His Godhood. ... [We] can relate to Him as a child, as a Son, and as a Brother because we know how that feels. ... And so in an attempt to draw closer to Christ and to cultivate warm and personal feelings toward Him, some tend to humanize Him, sometimes at the expense of acknowledging His Divinity.

"So let us be very clear on this point: it is true that Jesus was our Elder Brother in the premortal life, but we believe that in this life it is crucial that we become 'born again' as His sons and daughters in the gospel covenant." ("Building Bridges of Understanding," Logan, Utah, 17 February 1998)

Conclusion: Does It Matter?

After all these considerations, one might ask: But what if some of these images of Christ are dear to me? What is the harm in using an image that, although not entirely accurate from a doctrinal standpoint, still makes me feel good?

First, we must consider that we are dealing with sacred matters, which the Lord commanded to be "... spoken with care, and by constraint of the Spirit ..." (Doctrine & Covenants 63:64). Secondly, we must consider that false images of the Savior are a distortion of the true religion. If a religion would become solely a source of philosophical descriptions, emotional satisfaction, or simple

entertainment, what would be the role or necessity of commandments, covenants, ordinances, revelations, scriptures, and countless hours of voluntary service?

We also must consider the risk of trivializing sacred matters, with the consequent desensitization towards spiritual experiences, which could make one become skeptical towards the testimonies of others. Over time such an attitude could lead to the secularization of the religion—turning it into a mere code of conduct or a philosophy of life without any real spiritual dimension or divine connection.

In conclusion, let us review the Lord’s own words about himself.

“Thus saith the Lord your God, even Jesus Christ, the Great I AM, Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the same which looked upon the wide expanse of eternity, and all the seraphic hosts of heaven, before the world was made;

“The same which knoweth all things, for all things are present before mine eyes;

“I am the same which spake, and the world was made, and all things came by me.

“I am the same which have taken the Zion of Enoch into mine own bosom; and verily, I say, even as many as have believed in my name, for I am Christ, and in mine own name, by the virtue of the blood which I have spilt, have I pleaded before the Father for them.

“But behold, the residue of the wicked have I kept in chains of darkness until the judgment of the great day, which shall come at the end of the earth; And even so will I cause the wicked to be kept, that will not hear my voice but harden their hearts, and wo, wo, wo, is their doom.

“But behold, verily, verily, I say unto you that mine eyes are upon you. I am in your midst and ye cannot see me; But the day soon cometh that ye shall see me, and know that I am; for the veil of darkness shall soon be rent, and he that is not purified shall not abide the day.” (Doctrine & Covenants 38:1-8)

I testify to you that God, our Heavenly Father, lives. And that his son Jesus Christ also lives. His gospel can certainly reform societies and bring them into Zion—but He is more than just a social reformer. Christ can surely motivate us to achieve the divine potential that exists within each of us—but motivation is a side-effect of one’s acceptance of the laws and covenants of the gospel. In the pre-mortal world Christ was our Elder Brother, but he is far more—he is the Lord God Omnipotent, and through his atonement became the Father of all who accept his gospel. May we all live worthy of being called by him, his friends.

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