

OUR BELIEF IN GOD

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 Independence, Missouri

Sunday, January 11, 1953
 8:30 a.m. KDEC-KFRM
 Kansas City, Missouri
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A national religious magazine recently made a nation-wide survey of the religious beliefs and practices of the adult population of the United States. That survey disclosed that ninety-nine per cent of the American public believes in God. When I read those figures, I thought immediately of a statement which I heard made by a Methodist bishop some twelve years ago. He said: "Men do not need to be convinced of the existence of God, but of the importance of God." Too many of us, I fear, operate on the principle that we can get along perfectly well by ourselves if God will just mind his own business and let us mind ours.

We said last week that beliefs matter. It makes a great deal of difference how you believe in God, to what degree you believe, and what kind of God you believe in. Men inevitably tend either to become like the gods they worship, or to create some god to worship, in the image of themselves. What kind of God do you worship? Does your belief in him make any real difference in your life? Are you convinced of the importance, as well as of the existence, of God?

The first book of the Bible starts with the words: "In the beginning, God..." The belief in God is placed first in all Christian creeds. The Epitome of Faith or official Statement of Belief of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints contains as its first article: "We believe in God the Eternal Father, and in his Son Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost." Belief in God is basic, fundamental supremely important.

First, we may state it as our belief that God is the ultimate, the infinite Person. So far as our experience and observation go, wherever there is order, law, beauty, purpose, or utility, there is personality. For example, if in a ramble through the woods you should find some wild flowers scattered here and there at random, you might say that their placement was due to chance. But if you should come upon a group of those same wild flowers neatly and beautifully arranged in perfect rows, or planted in beds in the shape of rectangles, stars, half moons, or circles, it would be obvious that some intelligent personality had been at work. Yet if you would examine carefully the smallest individual flower, you would find purposeful, neat, orderly, arrangement with which man had nothing to do -- and beauty -- far surpassing the neat mass arrangement of the flower beds.

If you should pick up some tiny fragments of metal on your walk, you might properly conclude that they came there by chance. But if you should pick up a carefully assembled and organized group of such fragments, each fitting perfectly into every other fragment, and the whole functioning as a mechanism which told you the correct time, it would be excellent proof that some intelligent personality had been at work, making a watch. Yet in the heavens above your head there is much grander, vaster, and more intricate system of orderly arrangement, moving in a perfect timing that sets the pace of the time-keeping of every watch in the universe. Such organization and purposeful order give evidence of a supreme Person, with supreme intelligence, wisdom, and purpose.

Yes, in the universe about us we find purpose, intelligence, utility, love, beauty. The universe must be the creation of personality, Man's personality must be the creative reflection of a greater, an infinite and absolute personality. Otherwise we are forced to the conclusion that a lifeless, senseless conglomeration of fortuitously jumbled atoms has accidentally produced the most unbelievable miracle of all time -- the personality of man who is served by all the beauty and

utility of that universe. To believe that is utter folly and nonsense. It is much more reasonable, much more sensible, much more scientific, to believe in a God who is the first great Cause, the self-existent, uncreated Planner, Organizer, Creator, and Sustainer of all things.

Assuming that God is the ultimate and infinite Person, let us consider for a moment what kind of person he is. When Jesus wanted to sum up God's personality in the briefest possible terms, he called God "Father." When he wanted to amplify and emphasize this concept he told the parable of the prodigal son, and of a Father who grieved for his son's folly, but respected his personality too much to force him into obedience -- a Father who so missed his son's fellowship that he stood always ready to receive him back again with feasting and rejoicing when he "Came to himself." God is love -- and love is a manifestation of personality. As God loves good, so he hates evil; he sorrows over the rebellious and sinful; he rejoices over the obedient and righteous. In the person of his Son, God suffered the ultimate in physical and spiritual pain, that fallen man might be brought back into his presence -- for the God of love is a social being, a personality which is incomplete without the fellowship of other personalities.

Personality as we know it in this world is always associated with physical form, with size, shape, dimension, and location. You know me by observing my physical presence through your physical senses. You say that I am here and you are there. It is difficult for us to conceive of personality without form, dimension, and location. Yet most of us believe that the real personality is not the body -- but the spirit which continues to manifest personality in some other sphere even after the body moulders in death. When we begin to think about God, we are immediately confronted with this difficulty -- of trying to recognize his personality without trying to place upon that personality any restrictions of form, size, shape, dimension, or location. It is unnecessary to argue as to whether God has a body, or form, or location, or to decide whether he has substance. We are made in his spiritual image, but not necessarily in his physical likeness.

Modern science is now agreed that energy does not proceed from matter, but that matter proceeds from, and is a form of energy. The atom is composed -- not of little granules of matter, but of positive, negative, and neutral charges of electrical energy, which have no material, tangible substance at all until they come together in the atom. The force, or energy, or mind, or spirit which holds the universe together, and which forms the millions of atoms which compose its substance, is the mind, the force, the energy, the Spirit of God. Because we say that spirit is substance, we say that God is a God of substance. But he is indefinable, because to define him would be to limit him, and his personality knows no limitations of time, form, size, dimension, shape, or location. In the language of our scripture lesson, "He comprehendeth all things, and all things are before him, and all things are round about him; and he is above all things, and in all things, and is through all things, and is round about all things: and all things are by him, and of him; even God, for ever and ever." Paul says that "In him we live and move and have our being," that "to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him!" He is in all things, and is the power by which they are made and sustained. Yet he is not a vague, unapproachable, unknowable pantheistic God, so diffused through his creations that no one can find him. He is the ultimate, the infinite Person, who loves us, and who makes us for fellowship with himself, and who is willing to make himself known to us.

God is omnipotent. There is no other God besides him. There is one God ruling the universe, one law by which that universe is governed. If we discover a law of God's universe we may be utterly certain that under similar conditions that law will be valid and trustworthy for any man, at any place in the universe, in time or in eternity. God can be trusted. He and his laws are stable, eternal, unchangeable, impartial.

Because God is omnipotent, he must exercise free moral will or agency. There can be no one greater than he, standing over him and forcing him to do right. It therefore follows that God is good, and holy, and righteous, because he wants to be -- because he chooses to be -- because that is his nature. Right conduct that is forced has no moral value. God is always free to choose, but he always chooses right. He allows us, his children, the same privileges of choice, hoping that by our choice we will prove our worthiness to fellowship with his perfection and glory and righteousness.

We have said that God is love, that he is a God of mercy. He is also a God of justice. He could not maintain his laws unless obedience to those laws always brought certain desirable consequences, and disobedience always brought undesirable consequences or punishments. We can rely on his love and mercy only if we obey his laws. Though men may seem to escape his justice, they never do. There are always certain results or consequences which follow the breaking of God's natural or spiritual laws, whether we can always observe them at the moment or not. And there will be a final judgment day in which all things will be made right, when God's justice, as well as his mercy and his love, will deal with all men as they deserve.

God is an eternally creative personality. He did not create the world in six days and then sit down to a perpetual rest. Science now says that the processes of creation are still continuing -- that the cosmic rays which bombard the earth constantly are creative rays. The voice of God through Joseph Smith the prophet, nearly a century and a quarter ago said: "As one earth shall pass away, and the heavens thereof, even so shall another come; and there is no end to my works, neither to my words; for this is my work and my glory, to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man." His paths are straight, and his course is one eternal round.

God is articulate. He makes himself known to man. He can be known, not alone through his physical senses, but as men are quickened spiritually to discern him. Adam and Eve walked and talked with him in the Garden of Eden. Moses spoke with him in the burning bush, and together with Aaron and seventy of the elders of Israel, saw him and heard him on Sinai. Enoch walked and talked with God. Stephen at the moment of his death by stoning, saw God, and Christ at his right hand. Isaiah declared, "Mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts." Jacob said after his night-long wrestle with the angel, "I have seen God face to face...." Latter Day Saints believe that if God has been known intimately by all these men of the past, if he has spoken to them, and if he is eternal, impartial, unchangeable, and no respecter of persons, he may still be known today; he will still speak to men today, if they are tuned to hear him, and if they are worthy to receive that transforming Spirit by which it is possible to know and hear him. As we told you in last week's sermon, the restoration of Christ's church and doctrine in the latter days through the prophetic ministry of Joseph Smith began in the same way -- with the boy Joseph seeing in vision two personages, God and Christ, and hearing one speak to him saying, "This is my beloved Son; hear ye him."

God, the Eternal Father, still loves and seeks after his prodigal children. His work will not be complete until all have heard the story of his love, and had the fullest opportunity to repent of their ways and return unto him. Let us tune our hearts to hear the word of His Son; let us repent of our rebellion and pride and wickedness so that we may be worthy to know, to hear, to see, and to talk with God. Unless we thus know him, we have no life; for "this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent."