

SERMON SUBJECT: OUR STANDARD OF BELIEF

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 19:7-14.

The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring for ever; the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them is thy servant warned; and in keeping of them there is great reward. Who can understand his errors? cleanse thou me from secret faults. Keep back thy servants also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me; then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression. Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness; that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work. (II Tim. 3:16-17, American Standard Version)

Every man, every church, every great religion, must have some standard of belief -- some authority, some book of scriptures by which moral, social, and ethical values are determined, and conduct regulated. For the Christian believer, the standard of values and conduct is the Bible.

Many people have erroneously believed that members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints have repudiated and discarded the Bible: or that we have substituted the Book of Mormon for the Bible. No -- the Bible is still our first standard of belief, because it was known to the world many centuries before the Book of Mormon was known, although some of the history of the two books is contemporary. The Bible contains an account of God's dealings with his very weak, erring, human creation from Adam down until about the end of the first century after Christ. The men whose lives are depicted in its pages were not perfect. The men who wrote about those lives were not perfect. Their cultural and ethical and moral standards were not always what they should be. But there is never any attempt to excuse these men. The standards of God, as revealed in the Bible as a whole, are high standards, reasonable standards, safe standards on which to build a life, both for time and eternity. The Bible is a source book for rules of ethics and morality. It contains an indispensable testimony that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the Savior of the world. Latter Day Saints would be the last to discard or displace the Bible.

It was to the Bible that Joseph Smith went when he was puzzled about which church to join. It was to the Bible that he was sent to find prophecies of a marvelous work and a wonder which was to come forth in the Latter Days. It was to the Bible that he was sent to find prophecies foretelling the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. It was to the Bible that he was sent to find the doctrines of Christ which he was to teach, and to find reason and justification for the form of organization in the church which he was commanded to organize and establish. It was to the Bible that he was sent to find the principles of salvation and the ordinances of the gospel which that church was to teach and practice and espouse.

Latter Day Saints believe the Bible more fully, more completely than many other peoples who conveniently ignore or overlook whatever does not agree with their hereditary doctrine and teaching. Our creed is "all truth." We believe

the Bible not only on our own initiative, but we believe that God has commanded such belief. One of the revelations given to the church through Joseph Smith, and found in section 42 of our book of Doctrine and Covenants says: "And again, the elders, priests, and teachers of this church shall teach the principles of my gospel which are in the Bible and the Book of Mormon, in the which is the fulness of the gospel." (D.C. 42:5) Notice that the Bible was to come first: for the Bible was available before the Book of Mormon, and that in the two of them taken together is the fulness of the gospel. A little later in this same section we find this language: "Thou shalt take the things which thou hast received, which have been given unto thee in my scriptures for a law, to be my law, to govern my church; and he that doeth according to these things shall be saved, and he that doeth them not shall be damned, if he continues." We are commanded to take the scriptures as God's law, and told that he who does not keep the law contained in those scriptures shall be damned if he continues. Since we plan to devote several future sermons to the place of the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants in our belief, we shall not mention them further here, but continue to discuss our belief in the Bible as our first standard of belief.

How do we believe the Bible? There are many kinds and degrees of belief -- some reasonable and enlightened, some unreasonable, ignorant, and superstitious. Some people make the categorical statement that the Bible is the inspired word of God, meaning that in their thinking every syllable, every verse indication, every punctuation mark is inspired, infallible, and perfect. That attitude is not held any more by intelligent people, because it is an ignorant, stupid, superstitious attitude. All of the word of God is not contained in the Bible, neither is all the Bible the word of God. It contains the words of God; but it also contains the words of men, of angels, of devils, of saints, of sinners. It contains the words of Paul who was sometimes careful to state that he was expressing only his own opinion for which he did not claim any inspiration. The Bible contains many kinds of writing -- history, prophecy, tradition and folk-lore, pagan poetry (as in the Song of Solomon) genealogy, laws, epistles, and inspired teaching and preaching.

Not all portions of the Bible are equally inspiring, or equally inspired, or of equal worth and value. In any well-used Bible, there are certain chapters and pages which are well worn, well marked; and others which seem hardly to have been read at all, bearing witness to the fact that regardless of what men may say they believe, they actually believe that some parts of the Bible are better than others.

Most modern, intelligent people have long ago given up the idea that the Bible is inerrant, infallible in every word and syllable and punctuation mark. The Bible as we have it today is full of errors. There are obvious discrepancies in historical accounts. The Bible tells of one man who was two years older than his father: (II Chr. 21:20; 22:2) of another man who had neither father nor mother nor beginning of years or end of days. (Hebr. 7:3) The Bible says that God can do no evil, (James 1:13) and then says that God repented of the evil he had done. (Ex 32:14; Amos 7:6; I Sam. 15:11) The Bible says that an evil spirit from God troubled Saul. (I Sam. 16:14-16,23; 18:10; 19:9) The Bible says that the children of the kingdom shall be cast into outer darkness. (Matt. 8:12) The Bible commands us to hate our father and mother. (Luke 14:26) The Bible says that the Spirit of God led Jesus up into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. (Matt 4:1) The Bible tells us that God deceives prophets. (Ezek 14:9) The Bible quotes Paul as advising us to leave the principles of the gospel of Christ, as we go on to perfection. (Hebr. 6:1) These are only a few of the obvious and sometime ludicrous mistakes to be found in the Authorized, or King James version of the Bible.

There are other reasons why it is dangerous and logically unwise to claim absolute infallibility and plenary inspiration for the Bible. First, its authors

never claimed infallibility. Second, even if the Bible was letter perfect when first written, we do not have a single original manuscript of any book of the Bible -- that is, the manuscript originally written by the author's own hand. We have only copies -- no one knows how many times removed from the original. Our oldest copies for the books of the Old Testament date back to about the second century A.D., and for the New Testament to about the third century A.D. There is no way of knowing whether the copies we have are in agreement with the originals.

Third, there is the problem of translation. No Bible translator has ever claimed infallibility for his translation. The Old Testament was written without vowels, without accent marks which are used in modern Hebrew, and without divisions between the words. Meanings often had to be guessed at or determined from the context, and often there would be difference of opinion among the translators of the King James Bible. That is the reason for marginal notes which often give an alternative reading for some disputed word or passage. Oftimes the translators had to supply words which were not in the original in order to make good English idiom. Word order had to be determined. A good example of how word order can completely change the meaning of a sentence is supplied by one of the verses we have already used, from II Timothy 3:16: "All scripture IS given by inspiration of God, and is profitable;" says the Authorized version. "Every scripture inspired of God IS also profitable,..." says the American Standard. The verb "is" does not appear at all in the original Greek, and had to be supplied by the translators; then put at the place in the sentence where it would express a true meaning. As we have seen, different translators entirely disagree as to the proper meaning.

Latter Day Saints are cognizant of all these difficulties, and many more -- yet we believe the Bible is coherently and succinctly expressed in these words: "We believe that in the Bible is contained the word of God, insofar as it is translated correctly." Thus we are relieved of any seeming necessity for defending the obvious mistakes of the Bible, but are still committed to the great and eternal truths of salvation which the Bible contains. The mistakes in the Bible are the mistakes of men; the truth in the Bible is the word of God. "In the Bible is contained the word of God, insofar as it is translated correctly."

We are living in an age of many translations of the Bible. Within the last few years new manuscripts have come to light, which are most helpful in revising some of the old translations, and correcting many of the inaccuracies and obscure meanings. As language becomes obsolete and word meanings change, it will continue to be necessary to revise and re-translate the Bible from time to time. Good Bible students still find it necessary to consult several translations, plus marginal notes and commentaries, to arrive at a complete understanding of obscure verses -- and even then their comprehension may fall short of the ideal and the perfect.

It is a matter of some pride and satisfaction to Latter Day Saints that long before the multitude of modern translations become commonplace or popular, Joseph Smith was commanded to make a correction of the Scriptures. He was not a translator; he had no knowledge of either Hebrew or Greek sufficient to attempt a new translation of the Bible. He was not trained in the literary field either. But his claim was that under the inspiration of the same Spirit which moved the men who wrote the Bible in the beginning, he was able to correct many faults and errors, and to make clear many passages which had been a source of confusion and disagreement in the past. Many of his corrections anticipated by a hundred years the changes that have been made by modern translations of the Bible. The Inspired Version, as it is called, was begun in June of 1830, and completed on February 2, 1833, but because of persecution and forced moves of the church from place to

place, and finally the death of Joseph Smith in 1844, the book was not published until 1867, under the direction of a committee of which the son of Joseph Smith was a prominent member. Though we frequently use the Authorized or King James translation, as well as modern translations, especially when talking with friends of other faiths, we frequently have recourse to the Inspired Version to clear up obscure passages, or to get further light on the meaning of seemingly contradictory phraseology. A detailed study of the hundreds of verses corrected would be interesting and profitable, but is impossible within the time limits of this sermon. The opinion of one author and Bible student -- not a member of our church -- is expressed in the following quotation from P. M. Simms' book, "The Bible from the Beginning," page 145: "This much, at least, may be said of the changed readings found in the Bible of the Reorganized Latter Day Saints: Its author had the courage deliberately to alter the text and make it say clearly what many Bible students succeed in getting only by theological legerdemain."

The Bible is, and will continue to be, our standard of belief, against which we check all doctrine, all church organization, all ritual, all morality and ethics. The Bible is and will continue to be the compass that points us to God, the manual which we follow in our striving and seeking for eternal life.