The 'Lectures on Faith': A Case Study in Decanonization

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THE "LECTURES ON FAITH," seven 1834–35 lessons on theology and doctrine prepared for the "School of the Elders" in Kirtland, Ohio, were canonized in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants by official vote of the Church. In the preface of that volume, Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, and Frederick G. Williams — then the First Presidency — specifically justified the inclusion of the Lectures:

> We deem it to be unnecessary to entertain you with a lengthy preface to the following volume, but merely to say, that it contains in short, the leading items of the religion which we have professed to believe.
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> The first part of the book will be found to contain a series of Lectures as delivered before a theological class in this place, and in consequence of their embracing the important doctrine of salvation, we have arranged them into the following work. . . .
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> We do not present this little volume with any other expectation than that we are to be called to answer to every principle advanced.

Eighty-six years later, upon recommendation of a committee of apostles, the Lectures were deleted from the 1921 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. This action, though neither controversial nor particularly public, highlighted the problematic procedure of decanonization in a church characterized by an open canon.[1]

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[1] The only other case of removing a canonized section involves the "Article on Marriage," Section 101 in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants. This section explained the Church position on marriage as "one man should have one wife, and one woman, but one husband,

The purpose of the Lectures on Faith, as noted in the first lesson, is "to unfold to the understanding the doctrine of Jesus Christ." The Lectures contain extensive discourse and scriptural references not only on faith, miracles, and sacrifice, but on the character and attributes of God as well. They are systematically arranged with accompanying catechisms designed for missionaries to memorize and teach.

The orthodoxy and authoritativeness of the Lectures were first questioned in 1879 by Apostle Orson Pratt, then responsible for editing a new edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. Quorum of the Twelve President John Taylor reaffirmed: "The Lectures on Faith were published with the sanction and approval of the Prophet Joseph Smith and we do not feel that it is desirable to make any alteration in that regard" (Taylor to Pratt, 1 April 1879).

The authorship of the Lectures has long been debated. Sidney Rigdon, a member of the 1835 First Presidency and a respected theologian and orator in the Church at that time, has traditionally been identified as the person who delivered them. Some assume that Rigdon also wrote the Lectures (Gentry 1978). Alan J. Phipps (1977) statistically compared the Lectures with verified works of Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon and concluded that Rigdon authored Lectures 1 and 7 and Smith was responsible for Lecture 5. The remaining Lectures he felt were a collaboration. But a computerized study of stylistic wordprints by Wayne A. Larsen, Alvin C. Rencher, and Tim Layton indicates that Rigdon wrote Lectures 1, 3, 4, 6, and 7; Smith Lecture 2; and W. W. Phelps Lecture 5 (1980, 249).

The question of authorship is ultimately academic. Whatever Joseph Smith's original position, he noted his involvement in preparing the Lectures for publication: "During the month of January [1835]," his official journal records, "I was engaged in the school of the Elders, and in preparing the lectures on theology for publication in the book of Doctrine and Covenants" (HC 2:180). He underscored his personal support of the Lectures by noting in the introduction to the 1835 edition that he accepted responsibility for "every principle advanced." Furthermore, the First Presidency's introduction makes no distinction between the inspirational quality of the Lectures and the second part of the book which contained the Covenants and Commandments.

By 1921, things had changed. On 18 March 1920, the First Presidency selected Elder George F. Richards to chair a committee to prepare a new edi-

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except in case of death, when either is at liberty to marry again." Many have felt that because W. W. Phelps, Joseph Smith's scribe, read this declaration for inclusion into the Doctrine and Covenants during Joseph Smith's absence from Kirtland, that neither the document nor its inclusion met with Joseph's approval (see Stenhouse 1873, 193, and McConkie 1966, 52–53). If this were true, the Prophet would have had ample opportunity to modify or delete the statement before publication. A "Notes To The Reader" addendum, p. xxv, in the 1835 edition details changes in the statement after it had been canonized but prior to publication. The section detailing the opposition to fornication and polygamy was unchanged. Moreover, the Prophet later authorized the second printing of the edition after proofreading the text. This "Article on Marriage" was deleted from the 1876 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants without a vote of the general Church membership and was replaced by Section 132, an 1843 revelation declaring the principle of celestial marriage and the plurality of wives (see Van Wagoner 1986, 6–7).

tion of the Book of Mormon. Other committee members included Anthony W. Ivins, Melvin J. Ballard, and James E. Talmage. By June the group had expanded to include John A. Widtsoe and Joseph Fielding Smith. After the work on the Book of Mormon was completed, the committee turned its attention to the Doctrine and Covenants. Elder Talmage reported in a 23 February 1921 letter to Apostle George Albert Smith that "preliminary steps have already been taken toward a thorough revision of the Doctrine & Covenants, and we all know that the current editions, as printed in this country and in Liverpool, contains [sic] many errors by way of omission. Moreover there are certain improvements by way of Section Headings, amplification of notes, and rearrangement of text in the double column style to be made, if the present tentative plans are carried into execution."

Among the changes decided upon was the deletion of the Lectures on Faith. The committee's introductory explanation in the 1921 Doctrine and Covenants states that "Certain lessons, entitled 'Lectures on Faith,' which were bound with the Doctrine and Covenants in some of its former issues, are not included in this edition. Those lessons were prepared for use in the School of Elders . . . but they were never presented nor accepted by the Church as being otherwise than theological lectures or lessons."

Canonization procedures in the Church have never been officially specified. And not all revelations given to Church presidents have been presented to the Church for sustaining. The title page to the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants notes that the revelations were "Carefully Selected From The Revelations of God" and compiled by a committee of four presiding elders, including Joseph Smith. Elder George F. Richards, original chairman of the 1921 Doctrine and Covenants committee, wrote in his journal 29 July 1921 of other noncanonized revelations: "We read the revelations which do not appear in the present edition of the Doctrine & Covenants, about twenty in number, with the view of recommending to the First Presidency certain of them to be included in the edition we are just now preparing." The First Presidency apparently did not approve these suggested additions, for no new revelations were included in the 1921 edition.

This evidence seems to suggest that while all scripture is revelation, not all revelation is scripture. And the Doctrine and Covenants itself seems contradictory about what actually constitutes scripture. Section 68:4 affirms that "whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will of the Lord, shall be the mind of the Lord, shall be the word of the Lord, shall be the voice of the Lord, and the power of God unto salvation." But Section 28:13 implies that revelations must be accepted by a Church vote prior to canonization: "For all things must be done in order, and by common consent in the church by the prayer of faith."

Statements by General Authorities on this issue also seem to conflict. First Presidency member George Q. Cannon responded to this very issue in an 1891 question:

> It seems nonsensical that the Prophet of God should submit to such a test as this [common consent], and not deem the revelations he received authentic until they had

> the approval of the different quorums of the Church. They were authentic and divinely inspired, whether any man or body of men received them or not. Their reception or non-reception of them would not affect in the least their divine authenticity. But it would be for the people to accept them after God had revealed them. In this way they have been submitted to the Church, to see whether the members would accept them as binding upon them or not. Joseph [Smith] himself had too high a sense of his prophetic office and the authority he had received from the Lord to ever submit the revelations which he received to any individual or to any body, however numerous, to have them pronounce upon their validity (*Juvenile Instructor* 26 [1 Jan. 1891]: 13–14).

Elder Bruce R. McConkie, writing before he was called to the Twelve, supports Cannon's thinking:

> Revelations given of God through his prophets . . . are not subject to an approving or sustaining vote of the people in order to establish their validity. Members of the Church may vote to publish a particular revelation along with the other scriptures, or the people may bind themselves by covenant to follow the instructions found in the revealed word. But there is no provision in the Lord's plan for the members of the Church to pass upon the validity of revelations themselves by a vote of the Church; there is nothing permitting the Church to choose which of the revelations will be binding upon it, either by a vote of people or by other means (1966, 150).

These two statements contradict two presidents of the Church. Wilford Woodruff declared in 1892, while giving a legal deposition before the Western District of the Missouri U.S. Circuit Court:

> The church has a right to reject or approve of revelations and any man independent of the action of the church has a right to accept it or reject it as he sees fit and the church has a right to say whether they will accept it or reject it as a revelation, and before a revelation can be accepted by the church, as a law, it must in some form or other be presented to the church and accepted by the church, and that has been true since the time I first became connected with the church (1893, 206).

President Joseph F. Smith stated similarly in his 1904 testimony before the Senate committee investigating the seating of Reed Smoot: "I will say this, Mr. Chairman, that no revelation given through the head of the church ever becomes binding and authoritative upon the members of the church until it has been presented to the church and accepted by them." Questioned whether "the church in conference may say to you, Joseph F. Smith, the first president [sic] of the church, 'We deny that God has told you to tell us this?,' " President Smith replied: "They can say that if they choose. . . . And it is not binding upon them as members of the church until they accept it" (1907, 1:96). It thus appears that at least two Church presidents have verified the principle of common consent in canonizing revelation into the standard works of LDS scripture. There is no mention, however, of a procedure for decanonizing scriptural items such as the Lectures on Faith.

While writing a master's thesis at BYU in 1940, John W. Fitzgerald wrote to Elder Joseph Fielding Smith, a member of the 1921 committee that had deleted the Lectures on Faith from the Doctrine and Covenants, and asked him

why items published under Joseph Smith's direction were removed. Smith listed four reasons:

(1) They were not received as revelations by the Prophet Joseph Smith.

(2) They are only instructions relative to the general subject of faith. They are explanations of this principle but not doctrine.

(3) They are not complete as to their teachings regarding the Godhead.

(4) It was thought by Elder James E. Talmage, chairman, and other members of the committee who were responsible for their omission that to avoid confusion and contention on this vital point of belief [i.e., on the Godhead], it would be better not to have them bound in the same volume as the commandments or revelations which make up *The Doctrine and Covenants* (in Fitzgerald 1940, 343–45).

This reply poses several historical difficulties. While it is true that the Lectures were never identified by Joseph Smith as revelations, Section 102 (present section 134) is similarly not termed a revelation in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants but declared the Church position on "Governments and Laws in general." Probably written by Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery and later declared by the Prophet to be the belief of the Church, the statement has never purported to be a revelation but has been included in all editions of the Doctrine and Covenants.

The Wilford Woodruff Manifesto, first placed in the Doctrine and Covenants in 1908 as an "official Declaration" and now Official Declaration 1, was not presented to the Church as a revelation either and was first issued on 25 September 1890 as a press release through the office of Utah's delegate in Congress, John T. Caine. Addressed "To Whom It May Concern," the document encouraged Mormon support of recent laws "enacted by Congress forbidding plural marriages." Moreover, though the Manifesto in essence negates the last half of the 1843 revelation dealing with plural marriage (Section 132), that part of the revelation has not been removed — even though those who enter polygamy are excommunicated. Furthermore, a glance through the Doctrine and Covenants shows that a sizeable portion of it includes documents described in the book itself as "declarations of belief," "reports of visions," "historical narratives," "admonishments," "answers to questions," "explanations of scripture," "minutes of instruction meetings," "prayers," "letters," and "items of instruction."

Joseph Fielding Smith's assertion that the Lectures are "instructions," not "the doctrine of the Church," is historically erroneous. The 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants specifically titles the Lectures, "the Doctrine of the Church of the Latter Day Saints." The second part of that edition was labeled "PART SECOND Covenants and Commandments" (Woodford 1974, 41–42). Furthermore, the Articles of Faith, written by Joseph Smith and later canonized by inclusion in the 1880 Pearl of Great Price, directly parallel the Lectures as instructions on the general subject of faith. Moreover, the 1835 First Presidency declared in the preface to the first edition of the Doctrine and

Covenants that the Lectures on Faith contain "the important doctrine of salvation." The Lectures were expressly given to teach Church leaders and missionaries doctrines considered truthful and binding upon present and future Church members. To hold that such materials would *not* be doctrine puts the missionaries in a curious position.

Smith's third and fourth points, which question the Lectures' Godhead teachings, touch on their main difficulty. Simply put, the Lectures present Joseph Smith's 1835 understanding of the Godhead, which was modified by the time of his death in 1844. For example, Lecture 5 explains, "There are two personages who constitute the great, matchless, governing and supreme power over all things, by whom all things were created, and made. . . . They are the Father and the Son — the Father being a personage of spirit, glory, and power . . . the Son . . . a personage of tabernacle, made or fashioned like unto man."

The catechism for this lecture also queries:

> How many personages are there in the Godhead?
> Two: the Father and Son.
> Who is the Father?
> He is a personage of glory and of power. The Only Begotten of the Father possessing the same mind with the Father, which mind is the Holy Spirit.

It was not until 1841, twenty-one years after the First Vision, that the Prophet taught that "there is no other God in heaven but that God who has flesh and bones" (Clayton 1841). That idea was further developed when Joseph declared two years later in Ramus, Illinois: "The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit. Were it not so, the Holy Ghost could not dwell in us" (D&C 130:22).

Near the end of Joseph Smith's life his 1844 King Follett funeral sermon enunciated key Mormon concepts such as "God, who sits enthroned in yonder heavens is a man like unto one of yourselves"; "God came to be God"; "God himself, the father of us all dwelt on an earth the same as Jesus Christ"; "You have got to learn how to be Gods yourself" (*Times and Seasons*, 7 Aug. 1844). Present-day Mormon theology parallels Joseph Smith's Nauvoo teachings, though most Latter-day Saints are unaware that the Prophet's understanding of the Godhead evolved. The Lectures on Faith provide a window through which to view his 1835 perceptions.

Since the Lectures on Faith have not been included in the Doctrine and Covenants for more than sixty years, most Latter-day Saints are not familiar with their content and historical importance. Joseph Fielding Smith recognized this when he said: "I suppose that the rising generation knows little about the Lectures . . . . In my own judgement, these Lectures are of great value and should be studied. . . . I consider them to be of extreme value in the study of the gospel of Jesus Christ" (1966, 194). Despite the 1921 Doctrine and Covenants committee's concern over the Godhead confusion, Elder Bruce

R. McConkie remarked about one of the Lectures in a 4 January 1972 address at BYU:

> In my judgment, it is the most comprehensive, intelligent, inspired utterance that now exists in the English language — that exists in one place defining, interpreting, expounding, announcing, and testifying what kind of being God is. It was written by the power of the Holy Ghost, by the spirit of inspiration. It is, in effect, eternal scripture; it is true.

When the Lectures on Faith were removed from the scriptures in 1921, Church leaders were evidently unaware that the 1835 First Presidency considered the Lectures the "doctrine" portion of the Doctrine and Covenants. Neither the Lectures' importance nor their historical significance should be underestimated by Latter-day Saints. Their inclusion and eventual removal from the Doctrine and Covenants provides us with an important case study of the infrequent process of decanonization of Mormon scripture.

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