

Understanding the RLDS Dilemma

*“Diviners see visions that lie;
they tell dreams that are false,
they give comfort in vain.
Therefore the people wander like sheep
oppressed for lack of a shepherd.”*
— Zechariah 10:2

In the preceding chapters we have laid out a variety of unorthodox scriptures and corresponding beliefs. As you have read you may have asked yourself, “How could people believe such things? What kind of people must they be?” The answer is that RLDS, by and large, are pretty good people. That is, measuring by human standards. In all fairness, their beliefs have led them to be very moral people who make good neighbors, work-mates and fellow citizens. And they often carry out their lives with above average zeal. The reason they maintain such unorthodox beliefs is that they simply do not *know* any better.

In this chapter we will give some insight into why RLDS continue to maintain such beliefs, and insight into the forces which hold them in that condition. In the next chapter we will close by providing some practical suggestions for Christians who would like to help deliver RLDS from their deception.

A Zeal Not Based On Knowledge

RLDS often sense that they are very different from members of other churches. They are special. Unique. They are a comparatively small band of people who have been charged with the awesome responsibility of taking the restored gospel of Jesus Christ to those who have been laboring under a much lower level of enlightenment, those who have not yet had the benefit of Joseph Smith’s superior revelation. All these others are working with an inferior Bible brought to them by an equally inferior church. Nor do they have the benefit of the restored priesthood, authorized and called to this ministry by God Himself. This sense of a unique and high calling contributes to much of the zeal with which they live their lives. But, unfortunately, this is a misdirected zeal, one based neither in reality, nor in truth.

The Apostle Paul had this to say about his fellow Jews who were rejecting their Messiah, “Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I

can testify about them that they are zealous for God, *but their zeal is not based on knowledge*" (Rom. 10:1–2). Paul knew a lot about zeal. He had been a zealous Jew himself, as he persecuted the early Christians. He knew firsthand how zealous Jews could be. But their zeal did not make them right, as it had not made Paul right. Zeal is only right when it is in response to a knowledge of the *Truth*. When Paul embraced the reality of Jesus Christ his zeal became firmly anchored in the Truth.

Most RLDS sincerely believe they are promoting the truth of Jesus Christ. But, as we have seen throughout this book, what they are *actually* promoting are the perversions of Joseph Smith, cloaked in Biblical vocabulary. So while they may be sincere, they are sincerely *wrong*.

If RLDS are so sincere, how did they get into this spot? Because they have been kept ignorant of the real message of the Bible. For them, the Bible can only be interpreted correctly through Joseph Smith, through his *Book of Mormon, Doctrine & Covenants*, alterations of the King James Version and other writings and teachings. As a result, the message of the Bible has been both subordinated to Joseph Smith and filtered through him. But this is rarely the result of objective decision-making. For most RLDS it is all they have ever known.

The Tie that *Blinds*

"This year [1992] approximately 45,000 young Latter-day Saint (LDS) missionaries will be sent around the world to recruit 400,000 new members for the Mormon church."¹ Needless to say, the Mormon church has had a very aggressive recruiting effort for some time now. Each year they recruit well over one-and-a-half times the membership of the entire RLDS church. The RLDS church, on the other hand, has never had a recruiting effort which was anywhere near as large, disciplined or persistent. As a result, they have not grown as fast. Instead, they have relied on "natural" growth.

Most members of today's RLDS church are there because of either birth or marriage. Comparatively few have joined because of any conscious recruiting program. This means that there are a close family relationships which tie most RLDS to their church. For members who were born into a RLDS family these ties may go back five, six, seven or even eight generations, perhaps all the way back to the Joseph Smith era. And when a person marries into a RLDS family they are often adopted into the same doctrinal heritage.

For those who were born into the RLDS church Joseph Smith's scriptures and teaching are part of the spiritual wallpaper with which they were raised, a "given" which is never seriously questioned. Indeed, since they have never been taught the real message of the Bible they have very little basis for any such evaluation. If they do get to the point where they seriously question Joseph Smith and his concept of a restored church, they have to carefully weigh the consequences. After all, many RLDS believe that to deny Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon and the RLDS church is to lose the chance for Joseph Smith's highest heaven, the Celestial glory. In addition, leaving the church may well cost RLDS significant portions of the social fabric which constitute their life.

1. Sandra Tanner, from the Foreword to John Ankerberg and John Weldon's *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Mormonism*, (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1992), p. 7.

Oftentimes not only a person's church life but their family and social life as well all revolve around the RLDS church in one way or another. It can be a very challenging and scary situation. I know quite a number of people who have left the RLDS church. Every one of them has suffered broken or severely damaged relationships with family and friends. Most of these relationships never fully recover. Many become irreparably severed. You can see why RLDS weigh the cost before leaving their church. I know a number of RLDS who have begun down the road to truth only to realize where it is headed. They cannot muster the personal courage to continue their quest and instead make a conscience decision to "put their heads back in the sand," by their own admission. It's tough work.

Many RLDS are thus caught in a double-bind. They do not have an understanding of the Bible by which they can correctly evaluate Joseph Smith's claims. Plus they have a social and family network which discourages any serious questioning. If they do pursue the path of truth they must be willing to sacrifice the relationship of family and friends who will largely abandon them and see them as having lost their salvation. I met an RLDS lady just the other day whom I have known for many years. She expressly told me that she was very concerned for me because I had "denied my testimony" and that she was certain I had lost my salvation.

I will close this section with the counsel of Jesus regarding these "ties that blind."

"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn 'a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.' Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." (Matt. 10:34–38)

Unfortunately, this is nowhere more true than when RLDS members leave the heresy of Joseph Smith behind in order to worship and serve our Lord Jesus in *truth*.

Spiritual Immunization

When we see the open hostility between the Muslim world and the Judeo-Christian world of the West, it is difficult to believe that Muslims are also the children of Abraham. But they are. Today's Arabs are primarily the offspring of Ishmael and Esau, who were just as much the children of Abraham as were Isaac and Jacob. But there is a big difference between being a natural child of Abraham and being the child of *promise*. That special designation belonged first to Isaac and then to Jacob. This is where the rub occurs. The Bible tells us that Abraham took his journey up Mount Moriah in preparation for sacrificing his son *Isaac*, the Biblical child of promise. Muslims, on the other hand, believe that Abraham had actually been preparing to sacrifice *Ishmael* on Mount Moriah, and that *Ishmael* is Abraham's child of promise. This may seem to be only a slight alteration of the Biblical account, but we can see the monumental difference it has made in the world. Hundreds of millions of Muslims have lived under the delusion of being descendants of Abraham's promised child. This is a great part of the problem in evangelizing Muslims today, and why they are so militant against Judaism and Christianity: *they feel they already have the truth about Abraham*, and that it is *us* who are deluded. If they did

not already feel that they had the correct interpretation of the Biblical account, they would surely be more open to what the Bible is *actually* saying. Their small dose of the Bible has, in effect, inoculated them against hearing the whole story, *in truth*.

While the illustration above specifically highlights the Muslim problem, the very same spiritual dynamic holds true for pseudo-Christian religions. Biblical scholar F.F. Bruce makes the following observation. “People are frequently immunized against a disease by being inoculated with a mild form of it, or with a related but milder disease. And in the spiritual realm experience suggests that it is possible to be ‘immunized’ against Christianity by being inoculated with *something which, for the time being, looks so like the real thing that it is generally mistaken for it*” (emphasis added).² Because pseudo-Christian religions use the Bible as a source-book and use some familiar-sounding Christian vocabulary, uninformed people may assume that they are in fact Christian. In reality, however, their naïve use of the Bible more often than not actually *inoculates* them from hearing its truth, just as with the Muslims discussed above. *They think they already have the truth, why should they listen any further?*

Joseph Smith has had this precise effect upon his followers. Joseph developed a religion which, on the surface, looks enough like Christianity to be mistaken for it. The unfortunate reality is that his teachings often inoculate his followers from hearing the truth of the Bible when it is presented to them. For them, ultimate truth is to be found only in the writings of Joseph Smith and his successors, not in the pages of an ordinary Bible.

A Second Mohammed; Greater Than Christ

Throughout this book we have shown that Joseph Smith put quite a different “spin” on the Bible, just as Mohammed did per our discussion above. Joseph claimed that this new spin was an improvement on Christianity, and that his new church was also superior. This, too, is what Mohammed claimed for himself and Islam. And just like Islam, Joseph Smith’s churches have had a continuing antagonism with Christianity which is irreconcilable. Is it any wonder then that Joseph Smith readily identified himself with Mohammed? During the famous Mormon War in Missouri in the late 1830s he made the following claim. “*I will be to this generation a second Mohammed, whose motto in treating for peace was ‘the Alcoran or the Sword.’ So shall it eventually be with us—‘Joseph Smith or the Sword!’*” (emphasis added).³

Mohammed felt himself to be superior to Jesus. Joseph Smith entertained similar illusions of grandeur which allowed him to make the following unthinkable claim. “*I have more to boast of than ever any man had. I am the only man that has ever been able to keep a whole church together since the days of Adam. A large majority of the whole have stood by me. Neither Paul, John, Peter, nor Jesus ever did it. I boast that no man ever did such a work as I. The followers of Jesus ran away from Him, but the Latter-day Saints never ran away from me yet*” (emphasis added).⁴

2. F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 144.

3. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, pp. 230-231.

4. *Documentary History of the [Mormon] Church*, vol.6, pp. 408-409.

“Ye Are Not Sent Forth to Be Taught, But to Teach”

As we have seen, Joseph Smith was quite full of himself. Since he claimed to be having direct revelation from God, he proclaimed himself exempt from any other ecclesiastical authority, whether in or out of his church. He was beyond reproach. He commanded his followers to maintain this same mind-set. “Hearken ye elders of my church whom I have appointed: *ye are not sent forth to be taught, but to teach the children of men the things which I have put into your hands by the power of my Spirit; and ye are to be taught from on high*” (D&C 43:4a–c, emphasis added).

Since they had the benefit of the direct revelations of God, Joseph’s priesthood were to be beyond reproach, just as he was. In fact, it was actually *impossible* for them to be taught by anyone who did not have the benefit of these same revelations. Instead, *they* were the ones to do the teaching, since they alone had the true knowledge of salvation and the restored authority to bestow it upon people. Baptisms of other churches were utterly rejected as “dead works.”

“Behold, I say unto you, that all old covenants have I caused to be done away in this thing, and this is a new and everlasting covenant; even that which was from the beginning. *Wherefore, although a man should be baptized an hundred times, it availeth him nothing; for you can not enter in at the strait gate by the Law of Moses, neither by your dead works*; for it is because of your dead works, that I have caused this last covenant, and this church to be built up unto me; even as in days of old. Wherefore, enter ye in at the gate, as I have commanded, and seek not to counsel your God. Amen” (D&C 20, emphasis added).

By instructing his priesthood in this way, Joseph Smith was actually commanding that powerful mental filters be put in place to guard against any but his own teaching. This strategy has been very successful. Many RLDS even today maintain these same mental filters. They are considered “weak in the faith” if they fraternize with the enemy by considering an opposing viewpoint. This strategy has been effective in keeping his followers in the dark, generation after generation.

Married to Their “Experiences”

Joseph Smith’s Way of Evaluating Truth. If we are to believe Joseph Smith’s testimony then it is clear that he was being motivated by a perpetual stream of supernatural experiences. Since it is also clear that he had no real understanding of the Bible, it was the content of these experiences which molded and shaped much of the church he created. As we demonstrated in chapter 2, the power behind his experiences was rooted in the world of the occult. His personal experience, then, became his criteria for evaluating truth. It is no wonder that Joseph Smith encouraged his followers to use this same criteria. “Ask me if it be right, and if it is right, I will cause that *your bosom shall burn within you*; therefore, you shall *feel* that it is right; but if it be not right, you shall have no such *feelings*” (D&C 9:3c–d, emphasis added).

Joseph taught that the human heart was the place where truth was to be evaluated. This is a most significant concept. Mormons and RLDS alike talk about the “*burning in their bosom*” as a fail-safe confirmation of spiritual guidance. How different this is from the warning of the prophet Jeremiah, “*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?*”

(Jeremiah 17:9). The thing which Jeremiah says is “deceitful above *all* things” is the very thing which Joseph Smith says we should use to evaluate spiritual truth. Since Joseph himself had been deceived in this way it was understandable that he would lead his followers in his own footsteps.

Oftentimes Mormons or RLDS will give a friend or neighbor a Book of Mormon to read and think about. If this person ends up having doubts or questions they are often pointed to the following instructions found near the end the book which promote this same concept. “And when ye shall receive these things [the Book of Mormon], I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost; and by the power of the Holy Ghost, ye may know the truth of all things” (*BM*, Moroni 10:4–5).

These inquirers are told to thus ask God for a “*burning in their bosom*” which will be their *personal* testimony that the Book of Mormon is true. Once acquired, this personal testimony is never to be denied. To do so is to subject oneself to the eternal wrath of God. Those who reject the Book of Mormon without ever receiving a testimony are also in big trouble. “Wherefore, the Lord God will proceed to bring forth the words of the book [the Book of Mormon], and in the mouths of as many witnesses as seemeth him good, will he establish his word; and *wo be unto him that rejecteth the word of God*” (*BM* 2 Nephi 11:135, emphasis added).

The Biblical Way of Evaluating Truth. As we read the Bible, however, we find quite a different criteria for evaluating the truth of a message.

- When Paul took the gospel to Berea, the church there was commended for evaluating Paul’s message by the scriptures, *every day*. “Now the Bereans were of *more noble character* than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and *examined the scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.*” (Acts 17:11)
- When Paul was evangelizing his fellow Jews his primary tool was the scripture itself. “He *reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving* that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead.” (Acts 17:2–3; see also 9:22; 18:28)
- And when Philip was led to the chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch, he unfolded the Old Testament to his *understanding*, which resulted in his joyful conversion and baptism (Acts 8:26–39).

In each of the above examples people were called to an understanding of the revelation which God had *already* given: *the scripture*. Nowhere in the Bible are people asked to evaluate the truth of God by a “*burning in their bosom.*” Why? Because “*The heart is deceitful above all things*” (Jer. 17:9).

Examples of RLDS Experiences. Below are some examples of the kinds of experiences RLDS rely on to support their faith in Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, priesthood authority, etc.

- **The “Burning in the Bosom.”** We discussed this above. It is a most popular concept with Joseph Smith’s followers. Not only is it the way to gain a personal testimony of the Book of Mormon, but also a general guide to other kinds of spiritual truth and direction for one’s life, or the lives of others. You just have to *feel* that something is right in a very special way.
- **The Three Nephites.** The Book of Mormon contains a legend of three Nephites who were promised by Jesus that they would never die. This legend clearly imitates a similar speculation regarding the future of the Apostle John (John 21:20–23). These three Nephites were to continue their ministry until the Lord’s second coming, and would have the ability to show themselves to anyone they choose (3 Nephi 13:12–53).

The RLDS church is literally filled with supposed experiences with these three Nephites. They appear to people in dreams and visions, they visit people in their homes, they protect people from danger, they provide help to stranded motorists and they give prophetic messages. If you can imagine a human need, the three Nephites have been there to help. They often confirm some aspect of Joseph Smith’s teaching. They are often sighted at RLDS gatherings of various sorts. Their appearance is highly treasured and lends an air of special holiness to the event. And, of course, any encounter with these three Nephites confirms beyond the shadow of any doubt the validity of the Book of Mormon.
- **Patriarchal Blessings.** We discussed these in more detail in chapter 3. At some time in their life RLDS often seek out one of the church’s Patriarchs for a special blessing. The Patriarch will lay his hands on the head of the subject and prophesy. The pronouncements range from comfort and assurance to specific prophecies of what will lie in a person’s future. They may also include a supposed designation of the person’s tribal lineage within the tribes of Israel. This is always a most special occasion for the recipient; it is their direct, personal pipeline to God. Patriarchal Blessings are therefore treasured for the rest of one’s life.
- **Calls to Priesthood.** We discussed the RLDS priesthood in chapter 11. “Calls” to priesthood are supernatural manifestations generally given to a candidate’s pastor, or Presiding Elder. They are supposed to evidence the divine call of a person to a specific office of ministry. Additional confirming manifestations may or may not be given to the candidate. Manifestations are frequently given to third parties and constitute additional evidence of the divinity of the call.
- **Dreams, Visions and Healings.** Dreams and visions are quite common among some RLDS. Frequently some Book of Mormon character will appear and deliver a message for personal direction or act out a highly charged drama which must then be interpreted. Occasionally instructions will be given for furthering the work of “building Zion” in Independence, Missouri. The RLDS concept of Zion was examined in chapter 3.

RLDS Elders—and Elders only—practice the “laying on of hands” for healing. Sometimes people recover. Sometimes they don’t. When a person does recover it is held up as validation of the exclusive authority of the RLDS priesthood. This then becomes additional assurance that

Joseph Smith was indeed a prophet of God, etc. See chapter 11 for more detail on the exclusive authority of RLDS priesthood.

- **“Thus Saith the Lord.”** This phrase is used to introduce supposed verbatim messages directly from God. Such utterances are generally given by a priesthood member at either a preaching or prayer service. They may be directed to a group or an individual. Their content may range from comfort and assurance to either a stern warning or specific direction for a certain task or for the general course of one’s life. Needless to say, these kinds of utterances yield much power and influence over people’s lives, especially when they are given by one holding the “exclusive authority” of the RLDS priesthood.

Summary and Conclusion. Joseph Smith encouraged his followers to evaluate truth by an experiential “*burning in their bosom.*” The Biblical model for evaluating truth is by an intelligent appeal to scripture itself. As a result many RLDS continue to have spiritual experiences which perpetuate the same deceptions to which Joseph Smith himself had fallen prey. Since many of these experiences support Joseph Smith’s teaching, RLDS often assume that God is using their experience to confirm what they have already been taught, which even further solidifies them in Joseph’s teaching. This has trapped them in a circular cycle of deception and then confirmation, both of which are completely disconnected from the realm of Biblical truth. But since they have made the important assumption that their experiences must be from God, they then read back into the Bible whatever their experience suggests. They are so close to this circular cycle—and so invested in it—that they have a most difficult time intercepting it with Biblical truth. Their experience reigns supreme. I have had more than one conversation with RLDS people who have begun to realize the error of Joseph Smith. But when they realize that their discoveries may ultimately lead them out of the RLDS church they begin to reflect back, only to conclude “I could never deny all the experiences I’ve had.” They have been conditioned to believe that their experiences are utterly reliable, and unquestionably from God.

The admonition of the Apostle John has never been more appropriate, “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, *because many false prophets have gone out into the world*” (1 John 4:1). And, of course, all things are to be tested by the sure word of the Lord, *the Bible*. We should all do as the Apostle Paul encouraged the “less noble” Thessalonians, “*Prove all things; hold fast that which is good*” (1 Thess. 5:21, KJV).