

Be Wary of Man and His Words

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The Lord's inspired servants do their best repeat God's words as accurately as possible. They also point to Him as the source of all light and truth. Imperfect and corrupt men, seeking the praise of the world and filthy lucre, raise themselves up as a light in replacement of God. This paper addresses the false doctrine that men should be lifted up as our source of light. Hereafter this paper is divided into three parts; **I.** Statements by early LDS church leaders cautioning against putting trust in man; **II.** Scriptures that support trusting God only; and **III.** The misuse of God's statement "*Whether it be by mine own voice, or by the voice of my servants it is the same.*"

I. Early Teachings in the LDS Church about Trusting Men

Consistent with the Lord's words and scripture, early LDS church leaders taught members to avoid trusting in leaders, and said that to do so was to trust in "the arm of the flesh." Apostle George Q. Cannon stated, "Do not, brethren, put your trust in man though he be a Bishop, an apostle or a president; if you do, they will fail you at some time or place; they will do wrong or seem to, and your support will be gone; but if we lean on God, He will never fail us. When men and women depend upon God alone and trust in him alone, their faith will not be shaken if the highest in the Church should step aside" (George Q. Cannon, DW 43:322 [Mar 7, 1891]).

Apostle Charles Penrose, counselor to Pres. Brigham Young stated, "Our testimony does not depend upon Joseph Smith; it does not depend upon Brigham Young; it does not depend upon John Taylor, or upon the council of the Twelve Apostles, which is now the presiding quorum in the Church. I pin my faith to no man's sleeve; I am a believer in the Scripture which says, 'Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm'" (Charles Penrose, August 17, 1879, Journal of Discourses 20:295).

According to the Lord, those that heed every word of leaders are described in D&C 76 as telestial spirits. Those of a celestial nature heed the word of God. "And the glory of the telestial is one...For these are they who are of Paul, and of Apollos, and of Cephas. These are they who say they are some of one and some of another—some of Christ and some of John, and some of Moses, and some of Elias, and some of Esaias, and some of Isaiah, and some of Enoch; But received not the gospel, neither the testimony of Jesus, neither the prophets, neither the everlasting covenant. Last of all, these all are they who will not be gathered with the saints, to be caught up unto the church of the Firstborn, and received into the cloud. These are they who are liars, and sorcerers, and adulterers, and whoremongers, and whosoever loves and makes a lie. These are they who suffer the wrath of God on earth. These are they who suffer the vengeance of eternal fire. These are they who are cast down to hell and suffer the wrath of Almighty God, until the fulness of times, when Christ shall have subdued all enemies under his feet, and shall have perfected his work" (D&C 76:98-106).

Those who follow men rather than God's Spirit are accounted no better than liars, adulterers, and whoremongers. Following our Lord's word leads to the Tree of Life - eternal life. If a person focuses on a man instead of searching for and receiving God's word in revelation and scripture, they will be limited to the telestial kingdom.

Brigham Young stated, "Now those men, or those women, who know no more about the power of God, and the influences of the Holy Spirit, than to be led entirely by another person, suspending their own understanding, and pinning their faith upon another's sleeve, will never be capable of entering into the celestial glory, to be crowned as they anticipate; they will never be capable of becoming Gods...They never can become Gods, nor be crowned as rulers with glory, immortality, and eternal lives. They never can hold scepters of glory, majesty, and power in the celestial kingdom. Who will? Those who are valiant and inspired with the true independence of heaven, who will go forth boldly in the service of their God, leaving others to do as they please, determined to do right, though all mankind besides should take the opposite course" (Brigham Young, JD 1:312).

Pres. Young added, "What a pity it would be, if we were led by one man to utter destruction! Are you afraid of this? I am more afraid that this people have so much confidence in their leaders that they will not inquire for themselves of God whether they are led by him. I am fearful they settle down in a state of blind self-security,

trusting their eternal destiny in the hands of their leaders with a reckless confidence that in itself would thwart the purposes of God in their salvation, and weaken the influence they could give to their leaders, did they know for themselves, by the revelations of Jesus, that they are led in the right way. Let every man and woman know, themselves, whether their leaders are walking in the path the Lord dictates, or not. This has been my exhortation continually” (Brigham Young, JD 9:150).

We are charged by God to validate the truthfulness of what church leaders say. The Holy Ghost is the only source of truth that will never lead us astray. So said Brigham Young. “The First Presidency have of right a great influence over this people; and if we should get out of the way and lead this people to destruction, what a pity it would be! How can you know whether we lead you correctly or not? Can you know by any other power than that of the Holy Ghost? I have uniformly exhorted the people to obtain this living witness, each for themselves; then no man on earth can lead them astray” (Brigham Young, JD 6:100).

Nephi stated, “...whoso would hearken unto the word of God, and would hold fast unto it, they would never perish; neither could the temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary overpower them unto blindness, to lead them away to destruction” (1 Nephi 15:24).

Sadly, the narrative embraced by too many today is that our leaders cannot lead us astray. This is a well meaning but incorrect teaching. We hear, “Keep your eyes riveted on the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. We will not lead you astray. We cannot” (M. Russell Ballard, October 2014 General Conference). We are told to “stay in the boat” when there is troubled waters about us, that boat which is directed by men. Joseph Smith’s last three dreams had him get out of a sinking boat two times and out of a burning barn a third (see the paper, *Joseph’s Last Three Dreams*). “Let me remind you to stay in the course chartered by the Church. It is the Lord’s Church, and he will not permit it to be led astray. If we take the counsel that comes from the prophets and seers, we will pursue the course that is pleasing to the Lord” (Bruce R. McConkie, “Our Relationship With the Lord,” BYU Devotional March 2, 1982). “Keep your eye on the Prophet, for the Lord will never permit his Prophet to lead this Church astray” (Ezra Taft Benson, Conference Report, October 1966, 123).

The Prophets of scripture and Joseph Smith tell us the opposite. “We have heard men who hold the priesthood remark that they would do anything they were told to do by those who preside over them (even) if they knew it was wrong; but such obedience as this is worse than folly to us; it is slavery in the extreme; and the man who would thus willingly degrade himself, should not claim a rank among intelligent beings, until he turns from his folly. A man of God would despise the idea. Others, in the extreme exercise of their almighty authority have taught that such obedience was necessary, and that no matter what the saints were told to do by their presidents, they should do it without any questions. When the Elders of Israel will so far indulge in these extreme notions of obedience as to teach them to the people, it is generally because they have it in their hearts to do wrong themselves” (Joseph Smith, *Millennial Star*, 14:38, pp.593-595).

Men are not saved through their allegiance to imperfect, broken, fallen man – the arm of flesh, but through their diligent seeking of God and following the Holy Ghost that results from it. True messengers sent of God and inspired servants of God here on Earth will always act in ways increasing our faith in God, not in ways that inflate their limited role as a middleman in substitution of Christ and His Spirit as our mediator. True messengers do not seek for men to worship them, but for men to worship God. They do not consider themselves more holy than those they are called to serve and do not ask for special treatment – the praise of men and the filthy lucre often resulting from it. We read in the Book of Mormon “...for thus saith the Lord; Ye shall not esteem one flesh above another, or one man shall not think himself above another” (Mosiah 23:7).

II. Trust in God Scriptures

Hereafter is a small collection of scriptures that support looking to God, not man, for light. There are many more. We begin with the exact, chiasmic center scripture of the Bible, Psalm 118:8. It states:

“It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man” (Psalm 118:8).

“O LORD, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever. I will not put my trust in the arm of flesh; for I know that cursed is he that putteth his trust in the arm of flesh. Yea, cursed is he that putteth his trust in man or maketh flesh his arm” (2 Nephi 4:34).

“Cursed is he that putteth his trust in man, or maketh flesh his arm, or shall hearken unto the precepts of men, save their precepts shall be given by the power of the Holy Ghost” (2 Nephi 28:31).

“Thus saith the Lord; Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, that maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord” (Jeremiah 17:5).

“For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, The fountain of living waters, To hew for themselves cisterns, Broken cisterns [man] That can hold no water” (Jeremiah 2:13).

“Forasmuch as this people refuseth the waters of Shiloah that go softly, and rejoice in Rezin and Remaliah's son; Now therefore, behold, the Lord bringeth up upon them the waters of the river, strong and many, *even* the king of Assyria, and all his glory: and he shall come” (Isaiah 8:6-7).

“For behold, you should not have feared man more than God. Although men set at naught the counsels of God, and despise his words – Ye you should have been faithful; and he would have extended his arm and supported you against all the fiery darts of the adversary; and he would have been with you in every time of trouble” (D&C 3:7-8).

“For the leaders of the people cause them to err; and they that are led of them are destroyed” (2 Nephi 19:16).

“Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5).

And now I command you, my servant Joseph, to repent and walk more uprightly before me, and to yield to the persuasions of men no more” (D&C 5:21).

“Be strong and courageous, be not afraid nor dismayed for the king of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that is with him: for there be more with us than with him: With him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the LORD our God to help us, and to fight our battles” (2 Chronicles 32:7-8).

“Some trust in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the LORD our God. They are brought down and fallen: but we are risen, and stand upright. Save, LORD: let the king hear us when we call” (Psalm 20:7).

“For I will trust not in my bow, neither shall my sword save me. But thou hast saved us from our enemies, and hast put them to shame that hated us” (Psalm 44:6-7).

“It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in princes” (Psalm 118:9; 146:3).

“Woe to the rebellious children, saith the LORD, that take counsel, but not of me; and that cover with a covering, but not of my Spirit, that they may add sin to sin: That walk to go down into Egypt, and have not asked at my mouth; to strengthen themselves in the strength of Pharaoh, and to trust in the shadow of Egypt” (Isaiah 30:1-2; Romans 8:1).

“Their land is full of idols; they worship the work of their own hands” (Isaiah 2:8).

“The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so: and what will ye do in the end thereof” (Jeremiah 5:31).

III. It is the Same: God's Words versus Man's Words

Good men and inspired servants sent of the Lord do their best to quote God's words as accurately as possible, not adding to or taking away anything from them. These servants point to God as our source light and truth, not themselves. Contrast this with imperfect and corrupt men who seek the praise of the world and financial support from others. God defines this as "priestcraft" (2 Ne. 26:29). Such live for the accolades of men, filthy lucre, and more. They raise themselves up as a light in replacement of God. Our Savior stated that He is the light we are look to, and the things He does as our example (3 Ne. 18:24).

The definition of "priestcraft" is really pretty simple. It is about using God and his ways for selfish purposes (see 2 Ne. 26:29). It reflects the condition of the heart. If a person preaches to gain honor or respect, it is priestcraft. If someone shares a dream with you to show their connection to heaven and gain your respect, it is priestcraft. If someone tells you of a vision they had of you being married to them - to convince you to marry them - it is priestcraft. If they use their position to gain power or authority over you, it is priestcraft. If they use their position to gain sex, and make it seem acceptable to cover their lust, it is priestcraft. If someone gets money for their sharing of gospel knowledge, it equals priestcraft. The opposite of priestcraft is real love, the charity exhibited by Christ. He is the light we must hold up before men, not ourselves, along with the things He did (see 3 Nephi 18:24).

Thus Saith the Lord God's words are powerful and important, much more so than those of any man. God often introduces His word by using some variation of the phrase "**Thus saith the Lord.**" They alert us that we should pay close attention to what follows. The Doctrine and Covenants has many such phrases. They include, "**Hearken unto me**, saith the Lord your God" (Section 51); "Behold, **I am God**; give heed unto **my word**" (Section 13); "**Listen to the voice of Jesus Christ, your redeemer, the Great I AM**" (section 29); "Listen to the voice of **the Lord your God**, Even Alpha and Omega" (section 35), and so on.

Some things we read are not God's words. An example of a so-called "revelation" from God in the Doctrine and Covenants that did not come from Him, are portions of Section 20. Elder James. E. Talmage read its first few verses, believing that they were the words of Christ, or at least those given to Joseph Smith by Him. He believed they were also tied to the Lord's birth date. With this assumption, Elder Talmage added his own statements about this probability in His book *Jesus the Christ*, stating that April 6th was most likely the Lord's birthday. This book statement is believed to have started the LDS tradition that April 6 is Christ's birthday. In the Joseph Smith Paper's project, we have since learned that the first few verses of D&C 20 are not those of the Lord, a sent angel, or the Prophet Joseph Smith. Instead, they are added words of John Whitmer, Joseph Smith's scribe at the time. Whitmer used them to introduce the reader to the rest of the section, which is a revelation from Joseph Smith. Elder Talmage's mistaken belief that they were the Lord's words has led to a now fully entrenched LDS "tradition" that they reveal our Lord's birthdate (see the paper, "*The LDS April 6th Tradition*").

God's Words versus Man's Words The introductory paragraph to D&C 20 (above it) states that it is a "revelation given through Joseph Smith the Prophet," yet this introduction, along with the first few verses of Section 20 were written by a *committee* that compiled that particular edition of the scriptures in 1981. Nowhere in this section does our Lord Jesus Christ identify these words as coming from Him.

We now know, thanks largely to the Joseph Smith Papers project, that section 20 is a hodgepodge of statements thrown together by as many as six different early Church leaders, who did so in a hurry to get it ready for publication. Joseph Smith the Prophet *may* have been among them, but the original document also shows other "*voices*" that are not our Lord's. This is especially true of the first few verses of D&C 20, which we now know were written by John Whitmer, Joseph Smith's scribe at the time. Additional verses in Section 20 may be written by Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, or Sidney Rigdon, among others.

More importantly, many today *assume* these "servants" and others (like our General Authorities) are the "servants" God referred to in verse 38 of Section 1 of the D&C, where the Lord states, "Whether it be by mine own voice, or by the voice of my **servants it is the same.**" Many times their words **are not the same**. We should understand the context of this statement by God, and what He means by "**his servants.**" The voices writing in

D&C 20, and many others today are not "the same voice" as God's, nor those of *His* chosen "angels" – those sent from His throne who are His "servants" **sent to quote Him directly and accurately - word for word.** Thus, we should also be careful in how we use the word "*servant*" today and how we interpret D&C 1:38. We should pay close attention to those **servants sent of God** who *quote God's words accurately.* Statements by men are much less important, not matter how well-meaning or eloquent they might be. No man is on par with God. No man's words are equal to God's words. To make them equal is to raise ourselves up and lower God.

Does this mean that section 20 should be ignored? No. It contains many patterns for governing the operations of the church. But some of those patterns were created by men (some believe they suggest a Campbellite influence), and not necessarily the pattern laid out by God Himself for the Church.

Take for example, section 27, a revelation given in the voice of one of God's servants – this time an *angel*. One day Joseph set out to buy some wine for the sacrament. On the way he was stopped by an angel, who warned him he was about to purchase wine from his enemies, and that he might want to think twice about doing so in case it was poisoned. The angel didn't warn Joseph in his own words, adding His own commentary, but instead saying, "Listen to the voice of Jesus Christ, your Lord, your God, and your redeemer, **whose word is quick and powerful.**" From there *the angel quoted God* directly, delivering the message he was sent to deliver, accurately and without embellishment. He recited it word for word just as if it had come from the mouth of God Himself. He then departed. That is what it really means in D&C 1:38 when God said, "*Whether it be by mine own voice, or by the voice of my servants it is the same.*"

In the October General Conferences of 2010 and 2014 a leader stood and quoted this verse of scripture, *implying* that what followed in his words *would be the same* as the Lord's own words – as if He were expressing them. If he quoted the Lord's words exactly, then and only them "*they are the same.*" Certainly there are edifying words spoken by leaders, but this verse in D&C 1 doesn't necessarily mean the words of our leaders past, present, or future **are** the words of Christ, unless they are exactly His, or if they speaking under the power of the Holy Ghost (who is one with God and bears of the truth of all things).

The use of this phrase by some leaders today encourages trusting in man - "the arm of flesh." This is one of the biggest problems in our current culture and is a form of idolatry. Where possible, we should verify all things said or written - *as truth* - against the Spirit and with scripture. President Joseph Fielding Smith said, "It makes no difference what is written or what anyone has said, if what has been said is in conflict with what the Lord has revealed, we can set it aside. My words, and the teachings of any other member of the Church, high or low, if they do not square with the revelations, we need not accept them. Let us have this matter clear. We have accepted **the four standard works as the measuring yardsticks, or balances,** by which we measure every man's doctrine" (Joseph Fielding Smith Doctrines of Salvation, 3:203).

We read in 3 Nephi 19:8 about the Twelve Apostles at Bountiful and how they taught most effectively. "And when they had ministered **those same words which Jesus had spoken – nothing varying from the words which Jesus had spoken** – behold, they knelt again and prayed to the Father in the name of Jesus." Here His servants spoke the *same* words as Jesus, the people knowing that they were His. In this manner the real meaning of D&C 1:38 is fulfilled, "*Whether it be by mine own voice, or by the voice of my servants it is the same.*" Note verses 36 through 38 of D&C 1 hereafter. The whole section is the Lord's introduction to **His own words** that are to go forth to the world. He states:

37 Search these commandments, for they are true and faithful, and the prophecies and promises which are in them **shall** all be fulfilled.

38 What **I the Lord have spoken**, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself; and though the heavens and the earth pass away, **my word shall not pass away**, but shall all be fulfilled, *whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same.*

39 For behold, and lo, the Lord is God, and **the Spirit beareth record, and the record is true**, and the truth abideth forever and ever. Amen.

Note the Lord is counseling us to search *these* commandments - the ones in the revelations of this particular book – **that ARE HIS!** *No reference is made in this section to anything a Church leader might one day say in the future.* This is important in understanding the next verse, "What I the Lord have spoken I have spoken, and I excuse not **myself.**" They are His words, not mans. Our Lord is God. He makes no apologies for the precise predictions He has made. Note that God is speaking in the past tense. What He has spoken He *has* spoken. This is not a reference about what a future leader of the Church may say. He's referencing His own words here, and His words alone. "And though the heavens and the earth may pass away, my word shall not pass away, but shall all be fulfilled." If our powerful God said it, then we can be sure it will happen.

The key question is, "*what* is the same" as **His words**, what is the same as His voice? He is talking about *His* word as revealed in *this* book – the Doctrine and Covenants where *His* prophecies, *His* predictions, and the judgments *He* assures us **will** come to pass are found. The *servants* He is referring to are those men to whom these particular revelations in the D&C were given to and recorded by. This list includes Joseph and Hyrum Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, John, David, and Peter Whitmer, etc. We should not miss the clear reference in them in verse 6 - to "my servants" - the very ones instructed by Him to publish these words to the world.

Thus, in Section 1 of the D&C, His introduction to His words that follow, God is telling His people that all the prophecies foretold in the sections that follow this introduction *will come to pass.* Why - because He spoke it, "and *I excuse not myself.*" His words are quick and powerful and *will* be fulfilled! This is the context of the Lord's words, "*Whether it be by mine own voice, or by the voice of my servants it is the same.*" He is not saying that future leaders words are or will be His. He is saying that the words He gave past prophets in the Bible, Book of Mormon, and those given Joseph Smith and others *in the D&C* - relative to coming judgments in our day - *will* be fulfilled, but He gave them to these men. They are His words, given in revelation! They are not prepared talks by men, not matter how good and well-intended they may be. If the talks are given under the power of the Holy Ghost, then they are *comparable* to His words, but not necessarily the same.

Last Thoughts on Section 27 In the original Book of Commandments, Section 27 was 13 verses shorter than it is today, ending in verse 5, with the statement, "for the hour cometh that I will drink of the fruit of the vine with you, on the earth, and with all those whom my Father hath given me out of the world." We learn in the Joseph Smith Papers project that Oliver Cowdery added the extra 13 verses beyond verse 5 – those of God's angel, starting with a statement he says was made by Moroni. We see this in the later part of verse 5 when the angel seems to suddenly shift gears, stating, "I will drink of the fruit of the vine with you on the earth, and with Moroni..."

Nothing Oliver Cowdery added in section 27 has the same status as that of, "by my voice or the voice of my servant." The angel appearing to Joseph Smith spoke for God, providing nothing more or less than *His* words. Note the Lord's words regarding the words He gave His chosen servant Joseph Smith to give us. God states, "Wherefore, meaning the church, thou shalt give heed unto all his words and commandments which he shall give unto you **as he receiveth them**, walking in all holiness before me" (D&C 21:4). An important qualification for a true messenger is that the word of God they carry be as brief as possible, that it originate from God, and that it is accurate.

Idolatry It is important that we quote God and angels often and accurately. And it is important that we quote God more often than men – the arm of flesh, in our talks to one another. We have replaced too many of God's words with those of men today. Too many talks quote General Authorities over and over rather than the words of God. Leaders often quote each other. Sometimes they quote themselves from past talks. God has instead spoken to us! His words are powerful and truthful. We should reference them more frequently, doing so accurately. A good second choice is to quote those chosen messengers that quote Him word for word, those who are "sent ones" from His presence and throne. When a servant, chosen and sent by God states, "**thus saith the Lord,**" we should pay close attention to what follows, then confirm that they are indeed the Lord's words. We should then follow them. In this way we can avoid idolatry and deception. The author is grateful to Robert Smith and Rock Waterman for their insights and statements utilized in this paper.