

Episode 8

Mormon Identity

CULTIVATING THE SPIRIT OF REVELATION

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NARRATOR: Welcome to Mormon Identity a 30-minute talk radio program that addresses church topics important to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Our host is Robert L. Millet professor of Religious Education at Brigham Young University.

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ROBERT MILLET: We welcome you once again to this segment of Mormon Identity. I'm Bob Millet, your host and with me today is Professor Brent Top of the Department of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University. Welcome Brent.

BRENT TOP: Thank you, Bob.

ROBERT MILLET: Nice to have you here. Today we are going to talk this segment about cultivating the spirit of revelation. A very significant topic in Mormonism, in a sense one that we're pretty much to ourselves. It isn't that others don't believe you can be inspired, but what do you understand Brent about the singular nature of LDS concept of revelation?

BRENT TOP: I think in some ways it is semantical and in other ways it is doctrinal. Semantical, I mean by that is others of Christian faith and of other religious traditions would believe in inspiration or guidance from God, from the Spirit of the Lord whatever they want to call it.

ROBERT MILLET: They'll often call it illumination.

BRENT TOP: Yeah, so I think in that way we may be speaking about the same thing. And yet we by virtue of our belief in continuing revelation to a prophet of the restoration would believe that it's more than just maybe even casual guidance, that there is direct revelation from God to prophets and apostles. And we believe very strongly in the principle of personal revelation, that others may not feel as comfortable with because with revelation there are some what we may call occupational hazards.

ROBERT MILLET: So there are some of those things that prove to be our blessing could also be a curse.

BRENT TOP: No doubt about it. And it has been from the history of the earliest days of the Church and so forth.

ROBERT MILLET: Let me overview what we hope to accomplish this period. We want to talk about how to cultivate the spirit of revelation. It's a right, it's a privilege, and it's an opportunity. But

there are some things that we can do, things that the scriptures teach us that the prophets have set forth that we can do to make the spirit of revelation more a guest in our lives and make us as the Prophet Joseph Smith once said, "Appreciate how to grow in the spirit of revelation." Let's just begin by saying that as President Wilford Woodruff pointed out "While the gift of eternal life is the greatest gift we can receive in eternity, the greatest gift we can receive in this life is the gift of the Holy Ghost." And that being the case, we have to appreciate that the Holy Ghost is a revelator as Joseph Smith said. And no man can receive the Holy Ghost without receiving revelations. Brent, why don't you pick out a favorite scripture and start us off?

BRENT TOP: There are so many passages in modern revelation particularly that speak about revelation, inspiration, getting to know the mind and will of God. But I think one of the most important we can focus on right out of the shoot here is in Doctrine and Covenants section 8, the Lord himself defines for us what the spirit of revelation is. And he says in verse 2, "Now behold, I will tell you in your mind and in your heart by the Holy Ghost which shall come upon you, and which shall dwell in your heart," and then the Lord says, "Behold this is the spirit of revelation."

ROBERT MILLET: Brent, go ahead, I know you're going to move on, but read that next part of that verse if you will.

BRENT TOP: OK. "Behold this the spirit by which Moses brought the children of Israel through the Red Sea on dry ground."

ROBERT MILLET: Go ahead and make a comment about that verse. What stands out in your mind about section 8 verses 2 and 3, revelation given to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery.

BRENT TOP: I think what the Lord is saying here is that the way He speaks to us is twofold. And that is He is going to speak to us in our minds and He is also going to speak to us in our hearts. And that is why President Boyd K. Packer often says that we tend to feel the spirit of revelation more than we hear. And I think we feel and we think and have thoughts come into our mind. As the Prophet Joseph Smith said, I love to use the phrase, "sudden strokes of ideas" and I think that saying to a large degree God is going to give us ideas, thoughts in our head, that will just flow into us and we may not always understand where they come from. And then second of all we feel things in our heart, where it may not have a conceptual framework for it, but it certainly has a feeling of peace, of calm, that this is right or this is wrong. And so I think it is really important that the Lord is speaking to us through our minds and through our hearts. And so we will feel things, we will think things, now at times we may hear things, but that spirit of revelation defining it both mentally and affectively or our feelings. I think also direct us as to how we prepare and how we are going to come to know the mind and will of God through those two means.

ROBERT MILLET: Let's talk about each of them for a second. I think most of those who are listening can identify with those times when perhaps when you've been called upon speak in church or teach a lesson and we've prayed and it's been part of the preparation. And maybe even wandered a little bit trying to figure out where to go and which direction to take, when suddenly we begin to have ideas in my case it's often scriptural references, or it's prophetic statements that begin flooding into my mind.

BRENT TOP: And mine are sports statistics.

ROBERT MILLET: Yeah, that would probably be the case, batting statistics.

BOTH: [LAUGHING]

ROBERT MILLET: Sure, the idea of the Lord planting things in our head, as the prophet said, sudden ideas, sudden strokes of ideas. Joseph Smith when he wrote a letter to the Saints at Nauvoo that we have of section 128 of the Doctrine and Covenants said, "I now resume the subject of the baptism for the dead, as that subject seems to occupy my mind, and press itself upon my feelings the strongest." So he talks about both of them. In other words I've been thinking about this an awful lot and I sure have been feeling some things about it.

BRENT TOP: Yeah, almost always personal revelation is going to come out of a context where something, you see in the scriptures where the prophets will say as I was pondering this. And so that is where the mind comes into play is that I need to be thinking about it and preparing myself in that mental framework in some way. I always keep a notepad at the side of my bed, because I find that often times I get these sudden strokes of ideas, I've had situations where I had exact things I ended up writing in a book or in an article or something. That would come into my mind, even though I had been thinking generally. I think it was the Spirit that delivered something to me very specifically as well. So that I think is the mental process of revelation.

ROBERT MILLET: I had you read the section portion of that verse for this reason, we think of Moses, we think of a mighty miracle worker and he was that. And yet this scripture is very interesting, the way that Moses knew when they found their backs against the Red Sea, to move across that Red Sea, to walk across that Red Sea, to divide the waters was by the simple spirit of revelation. Either ideas came into his mind, or feelings came into his heart. And I think we have to appreciate that, that prophets work by the same principle.

BRENT TOP: In fact I think that also when we speak of that mental exercise that is involved in gaining inspiration and revelation. Is that it will also say to me that my thoughts are not going to be totally crazy, they're not going to be totally nutty. Even though I think maybe getting the thought, well I think I'll part the Red Sea, to us may seem rather nutty, but I think that is one of the things that Lord is trying to say to us is, as Brigham Young once taught, that the best revelation to some degree is common sense. That just knowledge of normal things around us, and the mental exercises that we do, is a very important bridge to personal revelation.

ROBERT MILLET: Let's pause for a moment and we will come back to talk about some specifics in cultivating the spirit of revelation.

[PAUSE]

ROBERT MILLET: We're back with Mormon Identity, we're discussing cultivating the spirit of revelation. And I'm joined today by Brent Top, a member of the Religion faculty at Brigham Young University. You know, Brent it occurs to me that one of the first things we ought to consider in discussing the spirit of revelation is the way in which the Lord first and foremost begins to work upon our consciences, that manifestation of the light of Christ

that every person who comes into the world is blessed with. Why don't you comment on that?

BRENT TOP: Well I think that from our earliest days as children that we can remember is that we have been taught and we have experienced when something is just not right. Where you feel bad or where just the very beginnings of conscience would say well should I take that piece of candy I know that's not right, that there is something within us in doing that. And I think our conscience is the means by which the light of Christ helps to direct us in paths of right or away from paths that are wrong. So our conscience gives us those inklings of the Lord's will from very, very early stages.

ROBERT MILLET: You know it occurs to me if I could use a rather crude example, I don't think it is crude, it's very homey. Let's suppose a group of us had just had a marvelous Thanksgiving dinner. The men are downstairs watching the Dallas Cowboys and the Detroit Lions play and upstairs the women are washing the dishes. If you can imagine the husband sitting downstairs with his friends hearing the dishes rattling upstairs and saying to himself, "It's really disgusting, you'd think they'd be a little bit more sensitive to us trying to watch this ball game." And then a little impression comes like this, "Well why don't you go upstairs and help them." And you say to yourself, "It's a good ball game." And the feeling comes, "Well why don't you go help them and get it done and they can come watch it with you." And you say, "the dishes we have with us always, but this is a good ball game." Now it seems to me if you continue to sort of smother and douse that small prompting, it would be rather tragic that night to kneel and say, "Heavenly Father I need some divine direction on this or that." I can almost picture the Lord saying I tried to give you direction earlier today and something quite simple.

BRENT TOP: I think we see in the scriptures that concept in the phrase that is used there grieve the spirit. And we can grieve the spirit in a wide variety of ways. You ask about consciences and those are great examples of it. I think as little children we got the conscience that, "Well I just feel that this isn't right." As we get older and as we are more in tune with the Spirit and it may not come as, "Go help your wife with the dishes." But often times our conscience comes into play of something that just doesn't feel right. And that there is some influence or whatever and if I then continue to press forward and not heed that warning even if it's not words or even a distinct thought, but just something that doesn't feel right then I am grieving the spirit and I often will lose it thereafter.

ROBERT MILLET: I thought the opposite of that the positive dimension of this is the Lord's principle, if you've been faithful in a few things, I'll make you ruler over many things. Let's just summarize this matter of conscience as a manifestation of revelation this way the 84th section of the Doctrine and Covenants sets forth this principle that if we are true to the light that is within us, a man or woman that's true to the light that they have will inevitably eventually be led to a higher light, the higher light of the gospel, the higher light of the gift of the Holy Ghost and so forth, and so conscience. Secondly, I think there is a temptation for us to sort of look beyond the mark when it comes to being guided by revelation. Brent, do you want to guess what's on my mind here?

BRENT TOP: Well, I think there can be a couple of ways of looking beyond the mark, and it could be that sometimes we make personal revelation, or our perception of what personal

revelation should be bigger than it needs to be. Or at the other end of the continuum that we don't even look at the mark, in that we dismiss anything and don't even consider the Lord to guide us and direct us. So I think there are some people that make it more mystical and everything is kind of super spiritual and then there are others at the other end of the continuum that look beyond the mark by not seeing those gentle promptings, the still small voice, those feelings and sudden strokes of ideas as anything other than just their normal day to day living.

ROBERT MILLET: I remember Elder Dallin Oaks when he spoke at Brigham Young University some years ago on revelation. Made the comment that he was aware of a husband and wife who frequently went shopping and that the husband would pray over every can of vegetables and Elder Oaks in his understated way said, "It seems like to me that this was a bit extreme." Yes I suppose it is. There comes a point where we begin to sense and know what's right and what's wrong. And God isn't necessarily going to guide us on every dimension of our lives, every moment and every second of the day.

BRENT TOP: If He did we wouldn't grow. We wouldn't learn. And that was one of the primary reasons why we came to this earth is to gain that experience and so sometimes He's going to leave us to our own judgments.

ROBERT MILLET: You know, I am fascinated by this statement from Elder Boyd K. Packer, who of course is a great spiritual giant in his own right but notice the caution. He said, "I've learned that strong impressive spiritual experiences do not come to us very frequently. And when they do, they are generally for our own edification and instruction or correction." Isn't that interesting?

BRENT TOP: That, I think is what I was saying earlier when we speak of occupational hazards. It is such a blessing to have personal revelation, but then if we are not careful we can then make it too extreme and think everything has to come by personal revelation and in many ways we set ourselves up for deception when we do that.

ROBERT MILLET: Yeah, as Brother Packer would say, "We open ourselves to being mislead." Good point. Brent, let me ask you a question, the Lord knows our bearing capacity, He knows what we are ready to receive and I suppose when we are ready to receive it. What do you think of when you hear the scripture in section 88 where the Lord promises rich blessings in verse 67 but He says, "Therefore sanctify yourselves that your minds become single to God and the days will come that you shall see him, but it will be in his own time, in his own way, and according to his own will"?

BRENT TOP: Well, with that verse, you mention several things, time, way, and will. And we want it according to our time, our way, and according to our will. And I've learned that you cannot, as President Packer would say, you cannot force the Spirit, you cannot put deadlines or timelines on the Spirit, and it doesn't always come the way that you expect it. And my experience has been when I served as a mission president, I would pray earnestly for guidance and direction on transfers, and where to put missionaries, or dealing with certain problems that often times I just had to wait and kind of let things sort themselves out. And then it became a little more apparent sometimes what I needed to do. And had I demanded an answer right at that second, I may have made the wrong decision.

And that sometimes revelation is going to come as we wait and watch. And then my experience has been the Lord is going to do it in a way much different than I expect. And while I may expect some very sensational overpowering spiritual feeling, in reality it may come by the power of something extraneous in the life or action of someone else that answers that prayer or brings that revelation to me.

ROBERT MILLET: We will pause there and we'll be back in just a moment.

[PAUSE]

ROBERT MILLET: Welcome back to Mormon Identity, I'm your host Bob Millet with me is my friend and colleague, Brent Top of the department of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University. We are discussing what it means to cultivate the spirit of revelation in our lives. Brent, let's move a slightly different direction and indicate that the principle that one of the keys to individual revelation is what we may call institutional revelation. Want to comment on that.

BRENT TOP: Well, I think that the principle of institutional revelation is that it is established fact that God is going to govern his kingdom from the top down and not from the bottom up.

ROBERT MILLET: Okay.

BRENT TOP: And that he always reveals his secret to the servants of the Lord, the prophets. And so my individual revelations to a large degree have to be within the framework of that institutional revelation as well. And so when I receive my personal revelation within that framework, it's basically going to teach me and direct me how to apply those things that are revealed to prophets and apostles within my own life.

ROBERT MILLET: I've heard it said that the Church will often reveal principles, but to individuals the Holy Ghost will reveal specific practices.

BRENT TOP: I think that is a very, and applying those principles to our very unique circumstances and situations.

ROBERT MILLET: The other thing I think of when I think of institutional revelation is the scripture, that is to say one of the keys to receiving personal revelation is becoming more than just a acquaintances with scripture itself. What's your comment on that?

BRENT TOP: You know one of the things I find very fascinating on the concept or the relationship between scripture, the standard works and personal revelation and guidance in our lives, is think about Moroni's visit to the prophet Joseph Smith. The three times in the night and then early the next morning. The focus of his message to the Prophet Joseph was scripture. Now interestingly, Elder Dallin Oaks has told us that the scriptures are like having our own personal Urim and Thummim. Now you can imagine how excited members of the Church would be if it was read over the pulpit a letter from the First Presidency that you could have your own personal Urim and Thummim with your name engraved on it through the Church Distribution Centers. We would be so excited about it, and yet that is what the scriptures do for us. And that we have the scriptures and I believe a lot of times the Lord is saying to us through the power of the spirit, I don't need to

answer that for you specifically because...

ROBERT MILLET: I've already spoken it.

BRENT TOP: I've already told you about that in your scriptures. If you will study your scriptures you are going to find the answer.

ROBERT MILLET: I remember, I think it was the October 2006 conference that Elder Robert D. Hales of the Twelve made the comment that "We speak to God through prayer, but frequently He speaks to us through the scriptures."

BRENT TOP: And don't you see, and I've heard and haven't been privy to those meetings, but I have heard that many times the prophets, seers and revelators when they are seeking an important revelation on a subject or dealing with an very important issue, often will go to the scriptures first and foremost to see what the Lord has spoken on that particular issue, because it really is somewhat small on our parts to then go to the Lord and say give me this revelation, write it on the wall, put it on the Liahona for me, but don't ask me to read the scriptures.

ROBERT MILLET: Where you've already revealed.

BRENT TOP: Exactly.

ROBERT MILLET: Okay so the scriptures themselves, this comment and that is, often we will be reading along in the scriptures and we might read what Nephi did or Peter or Paul and find that their particular action their saying as immediate relevance to us. But I think it's interesting that much of the time we will be reading along in the scripture and find our mind caught away to some other avenue and suddenly feel the spirit of inspiration on another matter entirely.

BRENT TOP: Yeah that's exactly what Elder Oaks said when he spoke of the concept of the Urim and Thummim is that it may have nothing to do with that particular scripture, but scripture reading opened the door. It became the vehicle by which personal revelation was able to come.

ROBERT MILLET: I'm interested; this has always been one of my favorite statements from Elder Bruce R. McConkie. This was made at the Regional Representative Seminar of April in 1982. He said, "Our tendency, it is almost an universal practice among most Church members, is to get so involved with the operation of institutional church that we never gain faith like the ancients. Simply because we do not involve ourselves in the basic gospel matters that were the center of their lives. May I suggest based on personal experience," he said, "that faith comes and revelations are received as a direct result of scriptural study. However talented," Now I think this is a haunting statement. "However talented people may be in administrative matters, however eloquent they may be in expressing their views, however learned they may be in worldly things, they will be denied the sweet whisperings of the Spirit that might have been theirs unless they pay the price of studying, pondering and praying about the scriptures."

BRENT TOP: I just believe that so much in that, that is one of the reasons why as I saw as a mission

president, that to me is one of the main reasons why missionaries are asked to study two hours a day. It's not just so their knowledge is improved so that they can teach better, which it certainly is, but I really believe that the study and that concentrated time of focusing on the Lord's words opens the door for them to receive revelation as to how to help this particular investigator, how to find these people, how to go about doing what I need to do. The scriptures, when they open up the scriptures in the morning it doesn't give the address of that golden investigator, but as they study the scriptures they are opening the door and putting themselves in a spiritual frame of mind where the Lord is going to direct them and talk to them.

ROBERT MILLET: Well said. Let's draw this to a close Brent by taking one final principle if we could. Let's talk for a moment about you and I and those who are listening being careful stewards over what God does reveal to us. I'm reminded of the statement by President Marion G. Romney, he said "I don't tell all I know, I don't tell my wife all I know." He said, "I found if I tell all I know the Lord will not reveal himself further to me, He will feel He can't trust me."

BRENT TOP: Well the Lord says the same thing in Alma chapter 12 where Alma says, "It is given unto many to know the mysteries of God, nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant unto the children of men according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him." If we believe what President Wilford Woodruff said as you mentioned at the very first of this program, that having the gift of the Holy Ghost and being guided by personal revelation is the greatest gift we can have in mortality that would be the most sacred thing in our lives and in our possession. And when we talk too freely and casually about those things then it now becomes ordinary, it becomes mundane instead of sacred.

ROBERT MILLET: Yeah, it seems to me that this is kind of a matter of spiritual discipline that is required on our part. The Lord wants to give us the mysteries of the universe as it were. He is handing them out as Elder Maxwell used to say. But He also wants to know that He can trust us with things that are sacred, that are personal, that are not meant for public eyes or public ears.

BRENT TOP: Yeah, and I really believe that the Lord expects us to use that same guidance of the Spirit that brought those spiritual messages and spiritual experiences to us, to know how to share them properly and within what context.

ROBERT MILLET: And maybe they should not be shared.

BRENT TOP: And I think often times there are certain things in our lives and husbands and wives and personal life there, there are some things we don't talk about in sacrament meeting.

ROBERT MILLET: That's right.

BRENT TOP: There are some things we don't even talk to our children about. And I think there are times when there is something that the Lord has taught me that is for me and not to be shared in my classes up on campus.

ROBERT MILLET: Here's a sobering warning from the Lord, at the end of the 63rd section of the Doctrine

and Covenants verse 60 the Lord says, " Behold I am Alpha and Omega even Jesus Christ, wherefore let all men beware how they take my name in their lips. Then He goes on to say, "Remember that that which cometh from above is sacred and must be spoken with care and by constraint of the spirit and in this there is not condemnation." So again, like you said, when Alma was taught in that 12th chapter of Alma to deal very, very carefully with things of the Spirit.

Well, we talked about a number of things; we talked about cultivating the spirit of revelation; we talked about beginning to paying heed to our consciences; I think it would be well for us to pray about our consciences; we've talked about the scriptures and institutional revelation as guides for receiving personal revelation; and we've talked about the need to be careful stewards. Well, it is a marvelous thing to belong to a church which encourages us to seek after, to receive the spirit of revelation. The one thing I love about the Prophet Joseph Smith is he didn't hoard spiritual gifts. In fact his comment, "God has not revealed anything to Joseph that he will make known to the least Saint as quickly as he is able to bear them is an indication that entrance into this Church is entrance into the spirit of revelation."

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NARRATOR: You have been listening to Mormon Identity thanks for tuning in. We hope you join us next time.

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