

## Episode 9

### Mormon Identity

#### KEEPING DOCTRINE PURE

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INTRODUCTION Welcome to Mormon Identity, a thirty 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 L. MILLET We welcome you once again to another episode of Mormon Identity. My name is Bob Millet. I'm a Professor of Religion at BYU and I'm joined today by my friend and colleague, Brent Topp of the Department of Church History and Doctrine at BYU. Welcome, Brent.

BRENT TOPP Thank you, Bob.

ROBERT L. MILLET Today, Brent, we want to discuss a very important matter, that is, I want to take a phrase that I heard used by President Gordon B. Hinckley many times, the need for us to keep the doctrine pure, keep the doctrine pure. I want us to be thinking about the question first of all of what is doctrine. But let me just begin by reading a few scriptural phrases. This first one for example from Isaiah chapter 28 verse 9, Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? Them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. But in vain do they worship me, Jesus said, teaching from doctrines the commandments of men. How about this one, "Would God be thanked," Paul wrote to the Romans, "that ye were the servants of sin that you have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you." Then Paul, toward the very end of his ministry, till I come give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. Brent, when you hear the word doctrine used there, for example in those biblical passages, what do you think of?

BRENT TOPP Well, I think there are two major definitions of doctrine: a general one and a more specific, or Latter-day Saint, one. For example, general, I think we would say doctrine just means teaching.

ROBERT L. MILLET OK.

BRENT TOPP Any kind of teaching is a doctrine. Elder McConkie reminded us there are two kinds of doctrine, true doctrine and false doctrine. So, any kind of teaching. But I think when we hear Paul's statement there, when we hear in modern revelation, or when we hear in the Church organization, when we hear the phrase, doctrine, I think we would think of those foundational, salvationally, significant teachings, that we would also maybe add the phrase, are official teachings of the Church, as well. So, doctrine can be just a teaching in general, but when we speak of keeping the doctrine pure, I don't think we are just talking in general mathematical teachings, we're talking about those doctrines of Christ that lead men to salvation.

ROBERT L. MILLET So, a person could conceivably get up in church and spout off the laws of motion and he would, or she would, be teaching the truth.

BRENT TOPP Absolutely.

ROBERT L. MILLET But they wouldn't be teaching the gospel or they wouldn't be teaching doctrine.

BRENT TOPP In fact, I think it's interesting you use the word gospel. In the Book of Mormon, both Nephi and Christ, when He comes to the Nephites after his resurrection, uses the term gospel and doctrine almost interchangeably.

ROBERT L. MILLET The doctrine of Christ is the gospel.

BRENT TOPP Right. And so, I think that when we think of gospel, oftentimes Latter-day Saints may think of gospel as church and everything related to it, when in reality the Book of Mormon prophets and the Savior himself, was speaking of those things that produce salvation, in other words.

ROBERT L. MILLET Well, in other words, when you think about it, when it said that the Book of Mormon contains the fullness of the gospel, it doesn't necessarily mean the BOM contains the fullness of gospel doctrine. There are certainly doctrines we teach and believe in that aren't in the BOM. But what it teaches, it teaches the good news of the coming of Jesus Christ and what it takes to be saved in and through Christ more effectively than any other book.

BRENT TOPP That's right, and so I think in that context, doctrine has a very specific meaning and then a general meaning as well, even with regard to Church teachings. We might say it's the doctrine of the Church that we believe such and such, but it may not be directly related to salvation.

ROBERT L. MILLET I think we've heard more in the last, oh I would say, ten or fifteen years about the importance of teaching doctrine, than at any other time and so I think this becomes an important conversation as we consider what it means to teach the doctrine and to keep the doctrine pure. Well let's ask this. How do we determine, given so many things that

are afloat, some things that are out there that are true, some things we no longer teach as a Church, or never did, how do we determine what is doctrine?

BRENT TOPP

One of my favorite passages in the D&C was given as a counsel to the missionaries as they went out to preach the gospel or preach the doctrines of the Kingdom. I really like in Doctrine and Covenants, Section 52, the Lord in giving those assignments to the missionaries of where they were to go and who their companion was, we might call this the great revelatory transfer of Elders, but in verse 9 the Lord gives them this guidance where He says, "Let them journey from thence, preaching the word by the way"--the word, we could say gospel there or the doctrines of the Church--saying none other things than that which the prophets and apostles have written and that which is taught them by the Comforter through the prayer of faith. I see three important things there that guide us in our teaching and understanding doctrine. The prophets and apostles we would first say, anciently are, their words are contained in the scriptures. That would be one that teaches none other thing than that which is in the scriptures and second, modern prophets and apostles, and then thirdly what is validated and verified and testified of by the power of the Holy Ghost.

ROBERT L. MILLET

OK, so it reminds me, in other words, that at least two keys here. One that we should teach that which is found within the standard works. Two, we should pay close attention to how the doctrine is taught by the leaders of this Church. Brent, you just made a comment, quoting from the D&C that we keep the doctrine pure by one, teaching that which is found in the Standard Works. I'm reminded of this passage, you read from the 52nd section, this is from the 42<sup>nd</sup> section, verse 12; And again the Elders, Priests, and Teachers of this Church shall teach the principles of my Gospel which are in the Bible and the Book of Mormon--I suppose if there had been a Doctrine and Covenants and a Pearl of Great Price then, those would have been added--in the which is the fullness of my Gospel. And so there is our injunction to teach from the scriptures, but also to teach from what we have learned from the apostles and prophets, in fact not a bad idea to use the apostles and prophets as our model for teaching scripture, how we teach, what we emphasize.

BRENT TOPP

There is a great example of how modern day prophets and apostles help interpret doctrine is found in the standard works and the scriptures. One that I was very touched by was Elder Russell M. Nelson's, several years ago, in a talk called, "Perfection Pending," where he really brought to this fore that the Savior himself was not even perfect, though He were sinless, until after the resurrection. And that perfection in the context that Jesus is advocating for all of us--

ROBERT L. MILLET

Be ye therefore perfect.

BRENT TOPP It really cannot be obtained in mortality but requires that wholeness, that finished product that can only come after resurrection and exaltation. I think that was a very, very meaningful interpretation and declaration of doctrine that is taught in the scriptures but modern day prophets and apostles amplified it and helped us to better understand it.

ROBERT L. MILLET You know, I made it a practice, some years ago as a Church educator, I would hope that I would have done this even if I weren't in the education business, but I made it a practice to begin cross referencing into my scriptures extremely helpful conference talks that brought to light that particular scripture. I'm thinking, here's some examples of some ones I made note of; Elder Jeffery Holland of the Twelve, his wonderful talk on the Parable of the Prodigal Son, from April, 2002, in which he talks about that older brother, and that really what we're talking about is the prodigal sons, plural, and the waiting, loving father; I thought of Elder Robert D. Hale's talk on the covenant of baptism from the October, 2000 talk. A very significant address on what we promised to do; I remember Elder Joseph Wirthlin giving a magnificent sermon on Isaiah 58 on the law of the fast, in April of 2001. Also, one that really touched me, was when he talked about leaving our nets to follow Christ. Those opening verses of the New Testament when he gave that talk in April of 2002. I think one of the most significant addresses in this dispensation was given by Elder Dallin Oaks of the Twelve on the Parables of the Workers in the Vineyard when he talked about that marvelous concept of becoming. Do you remember that?

BRENT TOPP Uh, uh.

ROBERT L. MILLET And then I remember Elder Ballard's marvelous talk on the doctrine of inclusion in which he's dealing with the question from Luke, Chapter 10, of who is my neighbor. And he gave that talk in October of 2001.

BRENT TOPP Then you notice that what those modern day prophets, seers and revelators are doing is the same thing that the Prophet Joseph would do with passages of the scripture. That they have the keys and the right or authority given them from God to be able to bring to the forefront or bring to light those doctrines which may not be fully understood by the earth. So that's why we would say that we amplify the Standard Works with modern scripture as well, and that's how we get doctrine.

ROBERT L. MILLET Fabulous. So, scripture, conference addresses from the General Authorities, this would help us to establish what is doctrine. How about, comment on this Brent, the importance of the official declarations or official proclamations of the Church.

BRENT TOPP Well, those are extremely important in establishing the doctrine of the Church because in Doctrine and Covenant 107, it speaks of the principle of unanimity that the Quorum

of the Twelve and the First Presidency when they make a unanimous statement has that great power and authority associated with it, and so when we get official declarations or proclamations, we've only had a handful of proclamations in the history of the Church, but for example, The Family: A Proclamation to the World, it is chock full of doctrinal teachings. It's not just about family. It's that context but there are doctrinal statements with regards to pre-mortal world, eternal identity and gender. All of those kinds of things are important doctrinal statements that weren't particularly established or clear in other teachings or talks but were brought clear to the forefront by those solemn, unanimous statements of the prophets, seers and revelators.

ROBERT L. MILLET You know, it seemed to me, Brent, that what we have in this proclamation on the family, as we call it, is the theological foundation, the basis for why we teach, believe, stress, focus on the family.

BRENT TOP Right, and those are doctrinal statements. So for example, something that I had written many years ago on, for the Encyclopedia of Mormonism, something with regards to the pre-mortal world and there was question about whether or not we could say that because it wasn't clear in the scriptures. And then, all of a sudden, we get the proclamation on the family, and now it is crystal clear because the prophets and apostles have declared it.

ROBERT L. MILLET You know, whether it's gender in the pre-mortal world--

BRENT TOP That was, that was the particular issue.

ROBERT L. MILLET ...or whether it's heavenly parents, those issues are established in that marvelous document. Whether we think of the role of Christ as the father and the son from the document, "The Father and the Son," in 1916, again the role of scriptures, the role of conference addresses and teachings of latter-day prophets, and how the gospel is taught today by them, and this matter of official declarations and official proclamations. Well, Brent, we've talked about scriptures, official declarations and proclamations, conference addresses, and teachings of the brethren today, we might add handbooks, manuals, which represent official productions, publications by the Church.

BRENT TOP I think that the word that you just used, official, helps, helps us to understand that it is within, under the umbrella of that which is sanctioned by the Church as representing the true doctrine of the Church.

ROBERT L. MILLET Actually, in many cases we would say they have been through the correlation process.

BRENT TOP Right. And I think that is something many members of the Church don't realize is that every manual, every publication, everything that would be under that umbrella of

official, has to have that stamp of approval. And so, it is saying that it is not outside the bounds of established doctrine of the Church or contrary to that.

ROBERT L. MILLET If I might make a pitch for what I consider to be one of the finest doctrinal manuals anywhere, it would be the little manual, "True to the Faith." I think that is one of the finest little presentations and if we want to know what doctrine we abide by, that's a pretty good guide.

BRENT TOP Well, let me give you a perspective as a former Mission President. I was thrilled to death that that was included in the current basic missionary library. Every missionary is expected to have that because very succinctly it tells us what the Church teaches and what it doesn't teach.

ROBERT L. MILLET There's another guide we might use, and this is a little more difficult, but important. We emphasize we teach what the brethren and leaders of the Church teach, today. What is currently taught by apostles and prophets. I say that because occasionally things come up, often in attacks from our critics about what was taught once by this leader or that leader, things that we do not teach today. I'll give as an illustration, Brent, the teaching as to whether Jesus Christ was married. Well the answer is that we don't know but I thought it was very, very appropriate and very important that at the time that the book and the movie, "The DaVinci Code" was so popular a while back, the Church issued, the leaders of the Church issued a very succinct, but very compact statement about this, that I think it read something like this: the scriptures are silent as to whether Jesus Christ was married. It is true that certain leaders of the Church gave their opinions on this matter in times past but those opinions did not then, nor do they now constitute the doctrine of the Church. What's your, what's your view on that, Brent?

BRENT TOP Well, I think that represents how something can, an opinion might even be true, but it doesn't represent the official position or doctrine of the Church. And I think we need to recognize that just because something was said in 1852, that if it isn't being generally taught in 2009 and in the twenty-first century, that is sure, that gives us an indication that that probably isn't in the main stream of the doctrine of the Church. And for example, and I think that it's important that we say that something could be true, and it isn't contrary to the scriptures, it isn't contrary to the words of the prophets, but it still may not be established, official doctrine. I remember a talk many years ago, Elder Bruce R. McConkie, it was a powerful witness of Joseph Smith and the First Vision and he said that the First Vision occurred on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1820-

ROBERT L. MILLET I think the language he uses, our tradition holds that it is on April 6<sup>th</sup>.

BRENT TOP ...and you know, and you think of scriptures that say, early spring. So, it's not contrary to the scriptures. It may very well be because of the significance of that day, but it may

be true but it was his opinion and it hasn't really been taught by any other of the brethren.

ROBERT L. MILLET So in that sense it wouldn't represent the doctrine of the Church.

BRENT TOP That's right, so it's an opinion and that opinion might be true but it is not something that we are all, we all subscribe to as the official statement or official doctrine of the Church.

ROBERT L. MILLET Good point. Good illustration. Let's talk for example about keeping the doctrine pure. When President Hinckley so often would say to leaders of the Church how important it is to keep the doctrine pure, what do you think he had in mind, Brent?

BRENT TOP Well, I again, the two words that pop into my mind are institutional and individual. That there are institutional measures that the Church has to keep the doctrine pure as we have already mentioned with regards to correlation. It is that the prophets, seers and revelators have the sole right to declare doctrine. Those institutional measures are there that we are beneficiaries of, but individually we have an obligation to keep the doctrine pure. I would say first and foremost by knowing what the doctrine is. By studying the scriptures, by knowing what the Church teaches, by being familiar with the prophets, seers and revelators and what they teach on those subjects. That we are not left on our own speculations or ideas.

ROBERT L. MILLET You know, I'm reminded of the passage in Ephesians where Paul talks about Christ giving some apostles and some prophets and some evangelists and some pastors and teachers. The language is what? For the perfecting of the Saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying, meaning the building up of the body of Christ, and he goes on to say what? That we all might become one that we all might grow toward the fullness of the stature of Christ. But in between there he says, that we may not be tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine and by the slight of men and cunning craftiness whereby they lie in wait to deceive. I think that's a warning for us. Pay heed to what the apostles say. I think it's not unimportant that when Jesus met with, the risen Jesus met with the Nephites that the initial part of His sermon, His adaptation if you will of His Sermon on the Mount, was His commission, His serious commission to the Nephites to pay heed to the words of the apostles.

BRENT TOP It's a great blessing, a great, great protective blessing we have from the Lord.

ROBERT L. MILLET We're talking today about keeping the doctrine pure. The importance of teaching the gospel, teaching the doctrine in preference to other things and the value of doing so. Let me just make one final remark, Brent, and then we'll talk about the fruits of keeping the doctrine pure. I'm reminded of President Packer stressing more than once, the need to teach the Plan of Salvation, teach the doctrine, and then when our young people hear

the gospel preached, when they hear the plan taught, they'll know why we do what we do and why we don't do what we don't do. Do you want to comment on that?

BRENT TOP

Well, I think there are a couple of things there and then I read one of my favorite passages in the Book of Mormon. I find it fascinating while many out in the world are good and wonderful people and they teach ethical behavior and yet it is not founded on absolute doctrine. So, for example, the doctrine with regards to chastity and purity and moral fidelity, the doctrines that we see clearly taught in the scriptures, without that and you only say, well, we don't want you to have pre-marital sex until you find someone you love or are committed to. I mean, we joke about that and you see, because every teenager, every person who's ever been guilty of fornication or adultery will say what? I thought I was in love. But when you can teach the doctrine of this is the Lord's word and we don't do this because this is what the Lord teaches about it.

ROBERT L. MILLET Including the idea of, we don't do it because God is a holy being.

BRENT TOP

That's right, and, you know, the sanctity of the body, and the souls and all of those doctrines that have been taught. Then it is much easier to then say, we stay morally clean and pure. We will not have sexual relations before marriage because this is what the doctrine is taught, and I think that's where ethics, devoid of doctrine, become relative.

ROBERT L. MILLET And shallow.

BRENT TOP

Yeah, in fact, the passage that I wanted to share with you is in Alma, chapter 12, verse 32. There's a very interesting insight on how doctrine plays a role in God's teaching of His children. Says therefore God gave unto them, Adam and Eve, a commandment after having made known unto them the plan of redemption. And so the commandments didn't get their power until the doctrine was taught. And so that sequence, teach doctrine, teach doctrine the why, then the what's make sense.

ROBERT L. MILLET Hm, hm. In other words, it's as if we're saying, let's teach the doctrine out of which derive the principles, then the precepts of thou shalt and thou shalt not, will make more sense.

BRENT TOP

In fact, I have a very personal experience with that and a very strong testimony of the power of doctrine in giving strength to the commandments and rules. While I served at Mission President, every Mission President knows that one of the challenges is to get missionaries to be obedient, to live by rules, but if all you do is pound on the pulpit with regards to the rules; get up at six thirty, you do this and you do that, it is kind of like the game Whack-a-Mole, where you will whack down a mole and another mole pops up. When you approach behavior that way, then it never really gets resolved or you always whacking at it. For us in our mission, we found that when we taught the



doctrines of the gospel, clearly and profoundly, then much of the behavioral problems took care of themselves because then they understood the reasons why and more importantly than even the reasons why, the doctrine then gave them the inspiration and the motivation to become better in their own personal lives as well.

ROBERT L. MILLET That's excellent. I think many of us have had the experience of teaching doctrine and finding the great power that it tends that in many cases we may feel to make application, but there are times when the spirit seems to whisper, let them make application--

BRENT TOP Absolutely.

ROBERT L. MILLET --let them find application in their personal lives. Teach the doctrine, teach the truth, and the spirit of the Lord will whisper to them what's most, which is those things which are most important

BRENT TOP I couldn't agree more. I agree.

ROBERT L. MILLET Here's a great statement from Elder Neal A. Maxwell, he said, doctrines believed and practiced do change and improve us while ensuring our vital access to the spirit. Both outcomes, he said, are crucial. That is, being able to be changed, be improved, but also having the spirit of the Lord. That was my point. The teaching of doctrine brings the spirit of the Lord. We have a marvelous experience when we're focusing on why we do what we do.

BRENT TOP In fact, there's a great example of what Alma does with his son, Corianton--

ROBERT L. MILLET Great illustration.

BRENT TOP --the chapter 39 through 42 of the Book of Alma in the Book of Mormon illustrate clearly that doctrine will have that great impact and great power to change behavior, to change lives. Alma didn't give a whole discourse on chastity or being totally obedient on your missions--

ROBERT L. MILLET In fact, as I recall, he only mentions it in two or three verses.

BRENT TOP --exactly, if that much. It is the doctrine of the fall, the atonement, the resurrection--

ROBERT L. MILLET Justice, mercy.

BRENT TOP All of those profound doctrines had a greater impact on Corianton than any application or behavioral based lesson would have had.

ROBERT L. MILLET Brent, you're very aware of what has become a terribly significant statement from President Boyd K. Packer on the teaching of doctrine. Why don't you share that with us.

BRENT TOP

Oh, it is one of my favorites. President Packer taught, true doctrine understood, changes attitude and behavior. The study of the doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior quicker than a study of behavior will improve behavior. Preoccupation with unworthy behavior will lead to unworthy behavior. That is why we stress so forcefully, the study of the doctrines of the Gospel.

ROBERT L. MILLET

That from the October, 1986, General Conference. Let's close with a scriptural passage that I think provides marvelous promise to you and me. The Lord's instruction to us in the 88<sup>th</sup> section of the Doctrine and Covenants verse 78, "teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory and principle and doctrine in the law of the gospel and all things that pertain unto the Kingdom of God." Now the verse just prior to that, what was said? "Teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom." We have marvelous promises from the prophets as to what spirit and what light and what truth and what intelligence flow into the room when an inspired teacher teaches doctrine.

[END MUSIC]