

Studying Christian Doctrine

Written by Eric Shuster
 Founder and Executive Director of the Foundation for Christian Studies



When one studies religious doctrine it may be done with encounters that are spur of the moment where the spirit bears witness to the truth of a particular doctrine. On the other hand the study may take on a more methodical process that includes prayer. The study may be of a particular theological subject, or to compare the doctrine of their present church with that of a different church. Whatever the case, doctrinal study is personal and should be performed in such a way as to ensure Christian truth is revealed and one's testimony strengthened. This is particularly important when studying doctrines of various churches, where questionable outside influences can take the unsuspecting Christian seeker off course and into unimportant or false tangential areas.

Beware of Careless Scriptural Interpretations

The most dangerous thing about evaluating Christian religious doctrine is that short of pure evil and without disciplined study and interpretation, one can find scriptural support to rationalize just about anything. For centuries man has found ways of extracting scriptures from the Bible, applying expansive interpretation with human philosophy, and walking away with questionable insights that eventually turn into "man-made doctrine." Interpreting scriptures out of context is a rampant exercise that has led to the justification of murder,

injustice, persecution, and all manner of sin. This being a far cry from what scripture was meant for according to Paul in his letter to Timothy which states: "all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3: 16). What is required to avoid such pitfalls in religious doctrinal study is three fold: 1) having the Spirit of the Lord; 2) being intellectually prepared; and 3) using credible sources of information:

Having the Spirit of the Lord

The most important element in formulating truth from a doctrinal perspective is to have the Spirit of the Lord to guide the seeking individual. Paul spoke of the Spirit educating man when he told the Corinthians: "For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God" (1 Corinthians 2:11).

Dallin H. Oaks of the quorum of the twelve apostles said the following with respect to having the Spirit of the Lord: "God teaches His sons and daughters by the power of His Spirit, which enlightens their minds and speaks peace to them concerning the questions they have asked. We also learn from these revelations that being taught by the Spirit is not a passive thing. Often the Lord's communication does not come until we have studied matters out in our own minds. Then we receive a confirmation" (Dallin H. Oaks, "Teaching and Learning by the Spirit," Ensign, Mar 1997, 7).

The Spirit of the Lord can transform the simplest and smallest things into that which is mighty and awesome. The Apostle Paul wrote "But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty" (1 Corinthians 1:27). It is often the small and unassuming things of our world, through the spirit, that bring about great spiritual works.

The Spirit of the Lord supersedes anything else intellectually or academically. From as far back as there have been scriptures available, the world has seen a vast array of scriptural interpretations. The same scripture from the Bible can be, and has been, interpreted many different ways, leaving the reader confused and bewildered. The Spirit of the Lord can break through all of that and speak directly to the individual (spirit to spirit), providing answers to those who earnestly seek spiritual truth. For more information on the Spirit of the Lord see the Sword Series™ essay on the Holy Ghost.

Being Intellectually Prepared

Although the Spirit of the Lord is most critical to understanding and reconciling doctrinal differences, one cannot dismiss entirely the value of intellectual preparation. The place of such knowledge in the seeking of spiritual truth is to properly place scriptural references into context, enable the comprehension of historical perspectives, and to recognize when additional research is necessary—all of which can be extremely valuable.

One need not be a theologian or scriptural scholar to be intellectually prepared for doctrinal study. Such academic preparation can be a blessing or a curse, depending on the degree to which such knowledge is an accelerator or inhibitor to the Spirit of the Lord. One must remember that spirituality is about faith and therefore the component of intellectuality takes a back seat to faith. If that were not the case, then the vast majority of Christians in the world today would be unable to participate in religion due to illiteracy and lack of education.

Intellectual preparation without having the Spirit of the Lord can be a hindrance in finding and understanding spiritual truth. This can happen when individuals study doctrine and attempt to rely on intellectual ability while overlooking the component of faith. This is precisely the reason that the Lord said to his disciples “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). Children are less apt to rely on their intellect and more likely to rely on the guidance they receive from parents—especially a Heavenly parent!

Although there are individuals who may be more intellectually prepared than yourself to conduct serious theological study—if you can read with average comprehension, are open to the spirit, and desire to know the truth in Christianity, you are prepared enough to begin such a journey and will find yourself more and more prepared as you exercise study and prayer.

Using Credible and Authoritative Sources

It was Sir Isaac Newton who said “If I have seen a little farther than others it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants.” There are many individuals and institutions that have come before the Foundation, who have conducted enormous amounts of research, study, and meditation on the various doctrines explored by our theological team. All of us Christians will greatly benefit from their hard work and inspiration. The staff at the Foundation consider it a key responsibility to identify and utilize the most credible and authoritative sources of information, while employing a disciplined and structured methodology to carry out the doctrinal exploration performed in this study forum. To accomplish this we utilized a variety of sources as required and appropriate:

The Bible as a Primary Scriptural Source

Because most of the Christian world is familiar with the Bible, the Foundation makes a concerted effort to use the Bible as a primary source. For the vast majority of the Foundation’s study we use the King James Version of the Bible. Although there are other translations of the Bible that are easier to understand and utilize a more modern language, we have found that some of these other versions of the Bible take liberties in their translations that can distort the writers intended meaning.

Other Canonized Scriptures

Despite the fact that many Christians don’t accept, nor embrace scriptures outside of the Bible, the Foundation does and will utilize the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price when it is believed the reader can benefit from the added insight that these remarkable modern day scriptures can bring.

Other Sources

Because the Foundation largely embraces the Christian belief system of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, our forum will utilize additional sources that have been produced by the Church or General Authorities within the Church such as: Gospel Principles, copyright 1997, published by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Mormon Doctrine, copyright 1966 by Bruce R. McConkie; and articles and talks written by past and present General Authorities of the Church (generally printed in Church sponsored magazines).

Belief versus True Doctrine

There are times when we as Christians may sometimes believe in something that may not be a part of our present church's doctrine or teachings. For instance, you may have spoken to Christians who believe in reincarnation, Catholics who believe in birth control, Evangelicals who are pro-choice, and Latter-day Saints who drink a little coffee every now and then. In each case, the belief system of the individual on a particular principle is in contrast to the teachings of their faith community.

It's common for someone studying Christianity to come across teachings that are in contrast to the teachings of their current faith community to which they ascribe to. This contradiction in belief versus doctrine can come about for three reasons:

1. The Holy Spirit can bear witness to an individual from an early age of the truth of certain principles and doctrines. This typically happens when someone is seeking the truth from the Lord and is ready to receive such revelation, regardless of their religious affiliation.
2. An individual can come across a true principle which fits with their way of thinking and therefore they quickly embrace it.
3. An individual can come across a false principle and is deceived into believing its authenticity, usually by another deceived individual with reinforcement by Satan. Such is the case with reincarnation, which has absolutely no scriptural foundation and is completely out-of-step with Christian doctrine.

When such a doctrinal contradiction arises the seeking Christian can reject the teaching, they may already believe in the doctrine, or they may eventually embrace the teaching through study and prayer. Some of the doctrines discussed by the Foundation may ring familiar and align with the beliefs of the reader immediately. Some of the doctrines discussed may be foreign to the reader and inspire additional study and meditation.

Aligning Belief to True Christian Doctrine

Even though an individual doesn't believe in a certain doctrine, if the doctrine is a true doctrine of the gospel of Jesus Christ then that individual must find a way to align their belief to that doctrine. Some doctrines will be challenging because they don't align with what you have been previously taught. When that happens the Foundation recommends that you take the Savior's advice and "become like a child." In a state of child like faith you should pray, read the scriptures, and ponder the doctrine more fully through the spirit. Keep in mind that you should never allow yourself to be "convinced" of a doctrine, but rather you come to embrace a doctrine through faith. Always rely on the Lord to guide your study and allow the Holy Ghost to help you discern what is true.

Understanding Simple Doctrine before Advanced

The apostle Paul admonished the early Christians to learn simple doctrines first, followed by more advanced doctrines later. In his first letter to the Corinthians he wrote: "I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able" (1 Cor. 3:2). Paul wrote a similar passage in his letter to the Hebrews (Heb. 5:12). Jesus Christ counseled the Pharisee Nicodemus on this same issue as recorded in John 3:12 when he said: "If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?" When one desires to understand the deep spiritual doctrines of Christianity they must be prepared to exercise faith and understanding in the more basic doctrines of the gospel of Jesus Christ first.

In a forum such as this, which explores a variety of doctrines, many of them advanced in spiritual nature, it is prudent to point out that care must be taken and preparations made to understand simple doctrines first and then to progress on to the more advanced doctrines.

For this reason the Foundation has organized its website in such a way that each section is somewhat preparatory to the next in logical succession. You can use the website as a reference to skip from one section to another in random fashion, but in doing so you may find yourself trying to digest meat when you have skipped the milk of earlier sections.

If you come across a doctrinal concept you don't understand the Foundation recommends prayer, earnest study, and the exercising of as much faith as you can muster. By doing so you will have the opportunity to receive personal revelation through the Holy Ghost that will answer your prayer and provide the understanding you are looking for. Be cautious when counseling with individuals, preachers, or pastors about doctrinal issues if you feel they may have an ulterior motive, or if you feel they may not be prepared themselves to participate in earnest and objective study on the doctrines of Christianity. Remember, the Spirit of the Lord is the best teacher you can have when studying Christian doctrine.

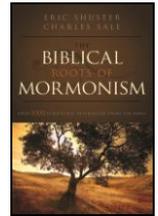
Prepare to be challenged

There may be instances where through the explanation of doctrines or the sharing of experiences you may find yourself spiritually challenged. When this happens it can be uncomfortable, even distressing. If you experience this we suggest that you turn to God in prayer and seek the guidance of the Holy Ghost (who brings the Spirit of the Lord) for direction and understanding.

CAUTION: Remember that the battle for souls is real in our modern day and there will be many people who will passionately assert themselves to discourage you from studying a form of Christianity that is different from their own. They may do this out of ignorance, out of a need to justify their own religious decisions, out of the pride of their own hearts, or perhaps even greed. Don't be led away by pamphlets, derogatory websites, or even the misguided concern of friends and family; find the truth yourself using the tools God gave all of his children: the scriptures, prayer, and the Holy Ghost. As Jesus Christ told his disciples: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (Matt. 7:7).

About The Sword Series™

The Sword Series™ is a collection of Christian theological essays that are freely distributed for the education and enjoyment of all. These essays later inspired the book *The Biblical Roots of Mormonism* by Eric Shuster (2010). The views expressed in the Sword Series™ are those of Eric Shuster based upon his study and understanding of the scriptures under the influence of the Holy Ghost. All formatted content in this paper is the property of Eric Shuster and may be distributed freely. Any modification of the content of this paper without the express written consent of Eric Shuster is prohibited. Copyright 2008 ©



About the Foundation for Christian Studies

The Foundation for Christian Studies is a non-profit organization dedicated to the study, teaching, and practice of Christianity with an emphasis on the doctrines and principles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormonism).