

*“LET BR. PRATT DO AS HE WILL”
ORSON PRATT’S 29 JANUARY 1860
CONFESSIONAL
DISCOURSE—UNREVISED*

PREFATORY NOTE:

THE FOLLOWING SERMON is taken from a mock-up of Pratt’s Sunday discourse in *Deseret News* galley proofs located in the Brigham Young Collection, Archives, Historical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Spelling errors in the original have been corrected, together with realigning certain sections which were obviously placed out of sequence. Aside from this, it remains unaltered. For the reader’s convenience, all omissions from the final text as printed in the *Deseret News*, 25 July 1860, are in italics. The few additions are shown in brackets.

While one of the more obvious advantages of presenting Pratt’s unrevised confession is the opportunity afforded the reader of noting what areas Young and others found objectionable, more justifiable is the insight it reveals into the complex personality of one of nineteenth century Mormonism’s leading intellectuals. What, on 29 January 1860, was for Elder Orson Pratt a sincere declaration of repentance and confession, would prove two months later to be but one additional thorn in a seemingly irreconcilable difference in value perception between the stubborn Pratt and his equally demanding church President, Brigham Young.

(G. J. B.)

ORSON PRATT’S 29 JANUARY 1860 DISCOURSE—UNREVISED
(REPORTED BY G. D. WATT)

I will read a passage of scripture to be found in Isaiah, lii. chap., 8 verse—
“Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice; with the voice together shall they sing:
for they shall see eye to eye, when the Lord shall bring again Zion.”

I will, this morning, take the words of the ancient Prophet as the foundation for a few remarks, applying them more directly to myself. And if they should be applicable to the congregation before me, I hope that they, together with myself, will be benefited by the same.

It is very evident from this passage of Holy Scripture that there is a period of time to come in the last days, in which all of the Elders of Israel and all the watchmen of Zion will understand alike, see alike, and have the same views in regard to doctrine and principles, and all division of sentiment will be entirely done away. Then that scripture will be fulfilled recorded in our Lord's prayer as he taught his disciples how to pray: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is done in heaven."

When I reflect that in heaven there is a perfect union of spirit and feeling among the celestial throng; when I reflect that in that happy place there is no disunion one with another; no different views; but that all will have the same mind and feeling in regard to the things of God; and then reflect that the day is to come when the same order of things is to be established here upon the earth; and then look at the present condition of mankind, I am constrained to acknowledge that there must be a great revolution on the earth. Where are there two men abroad in the world that see eye to eye?—that have the same view in regard to doctrine and principle?—that are of the same mind? They can scarcely be found. I doubt whether they can be found in the world.

How is it among us, the Latter Day Saints? One thing is true in regard to some few of them; shall I say few? No; I will say many of them; they do actually, in the great fundamental principles of the doctrine of Jesus Christ, see eye to eye. I cannot suppose that in our infancy and childhood we can attain to all this great perfection in a moment, and be brought to see and understand alike. But there is one great heavenly standard or principle to which we must all come. What is that heavenly standard or principle? It is the restoration of the Holy Priesthood, the living oracles of God to the earth; and that Priesthood, dictated, governed, and directed by the power of revelation, through the gift of the Holy Ghost, that is the standard of which all the Latter Day Saints and the Kingdom of God must come, in order to fulfill the prophecy I have read in your hearing.

It matters not how much information any man may have before he comes into this Church. It matters not how extensively he may be taught in the arts and branches of learning; it matters not how much natural wisdom he may be qualified with; it matters not whether he has occupied a high station in the eyes of the world, or a low one; it matters not what his prior condition may have been, when he repents before God and enters into covenants with the Father and the Son and with his brethren, and manifests before them and the whole world that he forsakes the world and the wisdom thereof: that is, that which is called wisdom by the world: that he is willing to forsake all things which are of the world that are inconsistent with the character of God, His attributes, His word, and His kingdom; that very moment he comes to that point, and goes forward in baptism, he becomes subject to a different power

from what he had before been subject to. He becomes subject to a certain authority that is different; he becomes subject to an authority which has come from heaven; not an authority ordained of man; not an authority which has been originated by human wisdom, or by the learning of mankind; not by inspired or uninspired books; for books never yet bestowed authority, whether inspired or uninspired.

The authority of Jesus Christ sent down from heaven, conferred upon man by His Holy Angels, or by those that may have previously received divine authority, is the true and only standard here upon the face of our earth; and to this standard all people, nations, and tongues must come, or be eventually taken from the earth; for this is the only authority which is everlasting and eternal; and which will endure in time and throughout all eternity.

This brings to my mind a revelation which was given in a general conference on the 2d day of January, 1831; the church then having been organized about nine months. All the Saints were gathered together from various little branches that had been established, in the house of old Father Whitmer, whose sons became conspicuous in this last dispensation as being witnesses of the Book of Mormon—whose house also became conspicuous as the place where the Prophet Joseph Smith received many revelations and communications from heaven. In one small room of a log-house, nearly all the Latter Day Saints east of Ohio were collected together. They desired the Prophet of the Lord to inquire of God and receive a revelation to guide and instruct the church that were then present. Br. Joseph seated himself at the table; br. Sidney Rigdon, who was at that time a member of the church, having just arrived from the West, where he embraced the Gospel through the administration of some of the elders, he was requested to act as scribe in writing the revelation from the mouth of the Prophet Joseph. I will read a portion of this revelation—“And again I say unto you, let every man esteem his brother as himself; for what man among you having twelve sons, and is no respecter of them, and they serve him obediently and he saith unto the one, be thou clothed in robes and sit thou here, and to the other, be thou clothed in rags and sit thou there, and looketh upon his sons and saith I am just. Behold, this I have given unto you as a parable, and it is even as I am: I say unto you, be one; and if ye are not one, ye are not mine.”

This I consider is a very important item.—Behold “I say unto you—be one, and if ye are not one, ye are not mine.”

This is very pointed, plain, and definite language, that no man can misunderstand. Upon what principle are we to be one? It is by hearkening in all things to that eternal and everlasting priesthood which has been conferred upon mortal man upon the earth. When I say that priesthood, I mean the individual who holds the keys thereof—is the standard, the living oracle to the church. But, says one, suppose that we hearken to the word of God in the Old and New Testament; suppose that we hearken to the word of God in the Book of Doctrine and Covenants; suppose we hearken to the word of God in the Book of Mormon, and at the same time we feel disposed in our hearts to lay aside the living oracles, what then? I would answer, in the first place, that

the premises are false. Why? Because the revelations of God command us plainly that we shall hearken to the living oracles. Hence, if we undertake to follow the written word, and at the same time, do not give heed to the living oracles of God, the written word will condemn us; it shows that we do not follow it according to our profession. This is what I wish to bring home to myself as an individual and, if the same thing will suit any other person in the congregation, I hope that he will take it home to himself. But, inquires one, how is it that you are going to apply this to yourself? I will tell you. But first let me quote from another revelation, contained in the Book of Doctrine and Covenants. Perhaps I had better read the passage which I wish now to bring to your understanding—"Behold there shall be a record kept among you, and in it thou shalt be called a Seer, a Translator, a Prophet, an Apostle of Jesus Christ, and Elder of the church through the will of God the Father, and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, being inspired of the Holy Ghost to lay the foundation thereof, and to build it up onto the most holy faith, which church was organized and established in the year of our Lord, eighteen hundred and thirty, and in the fourth month, and in the sixth day of the month, which is called April. Therefore meaning the church, thou shalt give heed unto His words and commandments which he shall give unto you as he receiveth them, walking in all holiness before me; for His word shall ye receive as if from mine own mouth, in all patience and faith."

Here then we perceive what is binding upon the church of the living God; what was binding upon them thirty years ago; and what has been binding upon them ever since, from the day that it was given, until the day the Prophet was martyred down until the year 1860 and until the present moment of time. All this time there have been a kingdom and church of the living God on the earth, and a man placed at the head of that church to govern, direct, counsel, preach, exhort, testify, and speak the truth to the people, and counsel them in the things pertaining to their duties, and pertaining to the kingdom of God.

Now, then, let me get back again.

The great subject before me this morning, is the words I have been repeating before you, and how they apply to myself. There have been a few things wherein I have been wrong; wherein I have disobeyed these instructions that are here laid down—wherein, no doubt, I have also brought at many times darkness upon my own mind. I want to make a confession to-day. I do not know that brother Brigham or any of the rest of the Twelve who have come here this morning, except brother Benson, knew of my intentions. I did tell brother Benson I thought of making a confession this morning, but the others were not aware of this. There are a few things which have been a source of sorrow to myself, at different times, for many years.

Perhaps you may be desirous to know what they are. I will tell you. There are some points of doctrine which I have unfortunately, *without knowing before-hand what the views of the First President of this church of God were*, thrown out before the people.

At the time I expressed these views, I did most sincerely believe that they were in accordance with the word of God. I did most sincerely suppose that I was justifying the truth. But I afterward learned [from my brethren] *the fact from the mouth of our Prophet Brigham from the mouth of that person whom God has placed at the head of this church* that some of the doctrines I had advanced in the "Seer" at Washington were incorrect. Naturally being of a stubborn disposition *myself*; and having a kind of self-will about me; and moreover supposing really and sincerely that I did understand what true doctrine was in relation to these points, I did not feel to yield to his judgement, but believed he was in error. How was this right? No, it was not. Why? Because [the Priesthood] *he is the highest [and only legitimate] authority [in the church in these matters] there is here on the earth in this kingdom. He is the living oracle of God to the church—to all the quorums of the church—and to all individuals of quorums.*

It was my duty as a servant of God to have at once yielded my judgement to his judgement. But I did not do it. I did not readily yield. I believed at the time that he was as sincere in his views and thoughts as I was in mine; and thought that I had made up my mind upon the word of God in relation to the matter, and concluded that it was not my duty to yield my judgement to him.

How is it about this? Have we not a right to make up our minds in relation to the things recorded in the word of God, and speak about them, whether the living oracles believe our views or not? We have not the right. Why? Because the mind of man is weak: and this man may make up his mind in this way, and another man may make up his mind in another way, and a third individual may have his views, and thus every man is left to his own authority, and is governed by his own judgement which he takes as his own standard.

Do you not perceive that this would, in a short time, cause opposition, disunion, and division of sentiment throughout the whole church? That would never fulfill the words of my text—would never bring to pass the sayings of Isaiah, that their watchmen should lift up their voices, etc.

In this thing I have sinned, and for this, I am willing to make my confession to the Saints; I ought to have yielded [to the views of my brethren] *my stubborn disposition to his will*. I ought to have said as Jesus did to his Father on a certain occasion, "Father, thy will be done."

I ought to have said to him that holds the keys, Br. Brigham, thy will be done in relation to this matter; thy judgement be correct; let that guide, and govern, and dictate my mind, and the minds of all the people of God. That was my duty; but I did not do it. The consequence has been, I have oftentimes felt to mourn, and have been sorrowful in my own mind in relation to this matter.

If I had not sense in all things, I had sense enough to know that it was not my place to correct the public mind; it was the place of him who holds the keys; and it was my place to yield; and if I had published a doctrine that was incorrect, it is his place to pronounce it incorrect; for me to get up and declare it to be true from the word of God, in contradiction to his voice, would be sinning still more before God.

"You have made this confession," says one, "and now we want to ask you a little question on the subject. What do you believe concerning those points

now? *You may say it is incorrect for you to withstand the ideas of the President, who holds the keys of the kingdom; but what are your views, what do you know concerning these points of doctrine now?"*

I will answer in the words of Paul. "I know nothing of myself; yet am I not hereby justified, but he that judgeth me is the Lord." So far as revelation from the heavens is concerned, I have had none in relation to those points of doctrine.

I will tell you what I have had revealed to me. I have had revealed to me that the Book of Mormon is from God; I have had revealed to me that the Book of Doctrine and Covenants is also from God; I have had revealed to me that this is the church and kingdom of God; I have had revealed to me that this is the last dispensation of the fullness of times; these things are matter of knowledge with me; I know them to be true, and I do know about many things in relation to God and to future events.

But when I reflect upon the subject, I have very little knowledge concerning many things. *What do I know, for instance, about God's being infinite in knowledge? This is the point I had reference to in the Seer. I have said in the Seer that God comprehends all things past, present, and to come—that there is not a solitary thing that ever did exist, that now exists, or that ever will exist, but what he fully comprehends.*

But when I come to ask the questions, how I know this? Have I had any revelation on this subject? I am constrained to acknowledge that I never had any revelation on this subject to myself. The vision of the heavens never has been opened to me to unfold this point of doctrine, and consequently I do not know this for myself. If there are any prophets who ever did know concerning it, they are the ones to testify of it and not me. Consequently I have no business to stand up and argue against a man that holds the keys of the kingdom of God upon a point of doctrine of this nature. I have done it; I have set up my natural judgement on this point as a standard of my own mind.

I have had many arguments with President Young upon this point; really supposing he was wrong, and that I was right; and that my understanding of the revelations upon this point true. But when I come to reflect upon the subject, how do I know I understand this revelation correctly? Am I not liable to be mistaken in determining the meaning of this revelation? Are there not many things contained in the word of God we do not any of us understand?

What do I know, for instance, about much of what is revealed in the last book of the New Testament, called John's Revelations? What do I know about much written in the Book of Daniel? Some few things are quite plain; but what do I understand in relation to some few of the predictions in the 11th chap. of Daniel? I doubt whether there is a person, unless he has been favored with direct revelation from heaven, who knows but very little about John's Revelations.

What do I know about many things in relation to the celestial kingdom? Was the celestial kingdom been opened to my mind? No. Have I gazed upon it in vision? No. Have I seen God sitting on his throne, surrounded by his holy angels? No. Have I knowledge of the laws, and order, and government, and rule which regulate that kingdom? No. *How then can I bear testimony that*

God knows all things past, present, and to come? If the revelations seem to apparently convey this or that idea, still I may be entirely mistaken in regard to the meaning of those revelations.

We are told by the living oracle upon the earth that this is incorrect doctrine. We are told that every God will continue to progress in knowledge to all ages of eternity; and we are told this by the highest authority on the earth. Must not I yield? I will at least say, I will be silent upon the subject, until I learn the facts from the heavens, and am counted to bear testimony of them, and then I can do it in truth.

There is one thing I will assure you of, God will never reveal anything to me, or to any other man which will come in contact with the views and revelations which he gives to the man who holds the keys. We never need expect such a thing.

"But," inquires one, "have you not felt anxious that the church should follow your ideas as laid down in the Seer?" I have not; if I had, I should have preached them; I should have tried to reason with you to convince you of their apparent truth.

I have always been anxious that the church should be governed by him who has the right to govern it—to receive revelations, and to give counsel for its guidance, through whom correct doctrine ought to come and be unfolded to the children of men.

"But," inquires one, "Do you not believe that God will suffer a man, standing at our head, sometimes to be mistaken?" That is none of my business. If God suffers any man, standing at the head of this kingdom, to be mistaken, I am not to blame.

God placed Joseph Smith at the head of this church. God has likewise placed Brigham Young at the head of this church; and he has required you and me, male and female, to sustain those authorities thus placed over us in their position. He has never released you nor me from those obligations. We are commended to give heed to their words in all things,¹ receive their words as from the mouth of God, in all patience and faith. When we do not do this, we get into darkness. *It matters not what they teach, what principles they advocate, God has placed them here, and God requires you and me to continue in our faith and patience to receive [the truth at their hands] their words and the doctrines which they advance.* I am going to do it. I am going to repent. I arose on *this stand* this morning to unburden my feelings in regard to these matters.

What is repentance? Is it merely to say we will do thus and so, and then go and do directly the contrary? When I say, I am going to repent of these things, I mean that I am going from this time henceforth, through the grace of God assisting me, to try and show by my acts and by my words, that I will uphold and support those whom I do know God has placed over me to govern, direct and guide me in the things of this kingdom.

I do not know that I shall be able to carry out those views; but these are my present determinations. I may have grace and strength to perform this; *and perhaps I may hereafter be overcome.* I feel exceedingly weak in regard to these matters.

I know what I have got to conquer—I have to conquer Orson Pratt, my [natural] disposition, judgement, and feelings, and bring them to bow to the

authority God has instituted. I see no other way. This is the only way for me, and the only way for you. I see no possibility for the words of my text to be fulfilled, and brought to pass in any other manner. You cannot devise or imagine any other way. The world have tried for six thousand years to become united, and they never have been, and never will be able to do it, if they should continue to remain as nations, kingdoms and peoples for six million of years to come. They never can bring about this oneness of sentiment and feeling by each man's being his own standard. No; it never was ordained by the Almighty to be brought about in that way.

The only way for us is to have a true standard which must be from heaven—a standard ordained of God, which we can follow with the upmost confidence—a standard we can have faith in—a standard to which all human wisdom and human judgement must give way. Such a standard only will be eternal, and will prevail when all other standards will fail.

There are some few other points, I have named one. I do not know that it is necessary for me to name all the various little items. There are some few points of philosophy wherein I really supposed I was right, and wherein I really supposed in my heart, in times past, that the man who holds the keys was wrong in his judgement. But all the arguments I have brought forth in relation to the one point mentioned are equally applicable to all other points of apparent differences of opinion.

If the Prophet of the living God, who is my standard, lays down a principle, whether it be a principle of doctrine, or a principle in philosophy, or a principle in science, or a principle pertaining to anything whatever, it is not for you nor me to argue against it, and set up our standard, and our views, and our judgement in order to make a division in the church of the living God—even if the division goes no further than our own individual selves. We must bow, if we would bring about that oneness spoken of in the revelations of God. We must yield to these things; and it is my determination to do so.

"But," inquires one, "suppose a Prophet of God should lay down a principle in philosophy which to all human appearance appears to be perfectly incorrect, what would you do then?" I would say I am weak—that my judgement is not to be set up against the judgement of the man placed at my head. If I cannot fully understand his views, it is my duty at least to be silent in regard to my own.

Do my ideas suit anybody else? It matters not whether they do or not; they suit me, and I am going to put the coat on. I am preaching to myself this morning. I did not come here to preach to the world, nor particularly to preach to the Saints, but I wanted to preach to myself, and see if I could not convert myself, and when I can get converted myself, perhaps I may do some good in preaching to the Saints and to the world.

I have not yet partaken of the sacrament this morning. I was determined to unbosom my feelings before I partook of these holy emblems, ordained of God for none to partake of only those whose hearts are honest and pure and upright before him. I recollected a certain scripture before I came here: "Therefore, if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there remember that thy brother hath ought against thee, leave thy gift before the altar and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother; and then come and offer thy gift."

These words came forcibly to my mind before I came to this house; and inasmuch as there may have been any feelings in the hearts of the Latter Day Saints that are now before me, I desire to do all in my power to bring a complete reconciliation.

I wish the whole Territory were here, and all the good people of England, and all the Saints that have ever seen any of my writings or read my views; I would say to them all—brethren, I make a confession; I have sinned; I have been so stubborn; I have not yielded as I ought; I have done wrong; and I will try to do so no more. And if the whole kingdom of God can be reconciled with me, I shall be very glad. At least I will do all I can to obtain their reconciliation.

These are my feelings to br. Brigham. I will make reconciliation to [the Presidency] *him*, and to the Twelve, and to [the Church] *all people*, so far as it is in my power, so far as I have *been stubborn and not yielded to [my brethren] the man God has ordained to lead me*. I consider these to be true principles, however imperfect I may have been; it has nothing to do with the principles; the principles are from heaven, *let br. Pratt do as he will: Amen.*

NOTES

¹This marks the beginning point of the inadvertent printing of Pratt's sermon in the *Deseret News*, 22 February 1860.

The corrected version of Pratt's confessional sermon was later reprinted in the *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star*, 22 September 1860, and was eventually published in the *Journal of Discourses*, volume 7, pages 371 to 376. Usually appended is the 1860 Church statement over the signatures of the First Presidency detailing the specific points of Pratt's theories considered false. Both are more conveniently reprinted in James R. Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Vol. 2 (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, Inc., 1965), pp. 214–223.