

Personal Revelation: The Promise and the Price

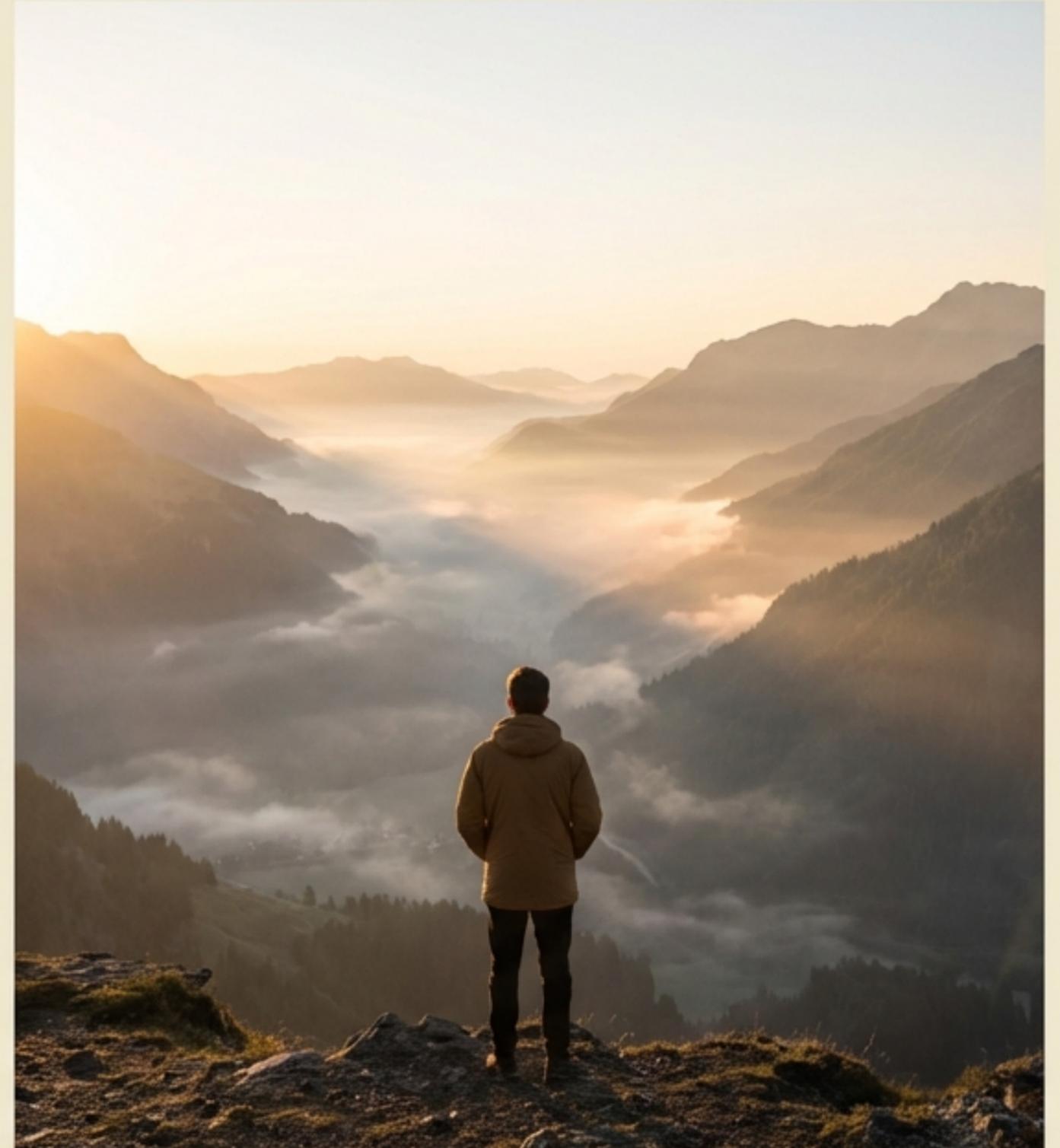
An analysis of the Mormon church's most personal doctrine—and its transformation from a tool of empowerment to a mechanism of control.

The Core Promise: God Speaks to You

Mormonism's foundational value proposition is that revelation did not cease. God resumed speaking to humanity through Joseph Smith and continues to speak not only to prophets, but directly to every individual member. This concept of direct, personal instruction from God is a fairly unique and compelling idea within Christianity.

“Behold, I would exhort you... that you would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true... he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.”

- Moroni 10:3-5





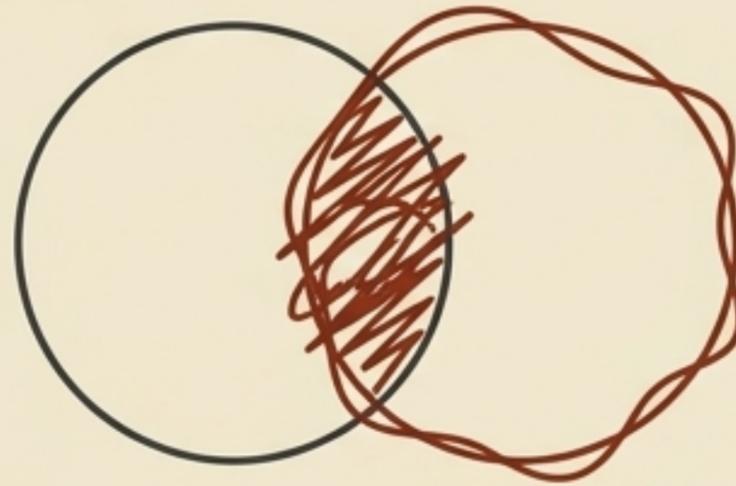
Joseph Smith's Expansive Vision of Revelation

Joseph Smith taught that personal revelation was the primary path to truth, even superseding learning from books. He declared that **every member**, regardless of status, could **access the same knowledge** as the prophet himself.

- “ **The best way to obtain truth and wisdom is not to ask from books, but to go to God in prayer and obtain Divine teaching.**
– **Joseph Smith**
- “ **God hath not revealed anything to Joseph, but what he will make known unto the Twelve, and even the least Saint may know all things as fast as he is able to bear them.**
– **Joseph Smith, June 27, 1839**

The First Test: When Revelations Collide

The promise of universal revelation was tested almost immediately. Hyrum Page, one of the Eight Witnesses, claimed to receive his own revelations for the church through a seer stone—the same method Joseph Smith used.



Joseph Smith was forced to produce a new revelation declaring that Page's revelations were from Satan and that only one man—the prophet—could receive revelation for the entire church.

Key Takeaway: From the very beginning, the empowering promise of personal revelation clashed with the need to maintain a single line of authority.

Rhetorical Question: So, is personal revelation about discovering truth, or is it about confirming authority?

From a Divine Voice to a Subtle Feeling

Over the 20th century, as claims of grand visions and audible divine communication ceased, leaders began to redefine the nature of revelation for the general membership.

Then



“...even the least Saint may know all things...”

— Joseph Smith

Now



“These delicate, refined spiritual communications are not seen with our eyes, nor heard with our ears. And even though it is described as a voice, it is a voice that one feels more than one hears.”

— Boyd K. Packer, 1982

This shift dramatically lowers the bar for what constitutes **‘revelation,’** moving it from direct instruction to **subjective** feeling, and subtly undercutting the credibility of Joseph Smith’s more literal claims.

Managing Modern Expectations

At a 2017 “Face to Face” event, Apostles Dallin H. Oaks and M. Russell Ballard took pre-screened questions from the youth of the church. Their answers reveal the modern, restrictive framework for personal revelation.

I pray for answers and a confirmation of the spirit, but my answers don't seem to come. How do I truly come to know and believe for myself?

The Official Answer: Don't Expect a Voice

“You **don't hear voices**, you're not going to have a **vision**, that's very unusual. But really the **things you feel within your heart** are the way Heavenly Father ultimately **answers prayers**. What your **feelings** are is **the process of conversion**.”

— M. Russell Ballard

The grand promise of direct divine communication has been fully replaced. Revelation is now **explicitly** defined as feelings of the heart. This raises a critical question: how does one distinguish divine feelings from personal emotion?

The Inevitable Dilemma

How can I differentiate between the Holy Ghost and my own thoughts and feelings?

This is the crucial question for any system that relies on subjective feeling to determine truth. Without a reliable method to distinguish divine influence from personal desire, confirmation bias becomes unavoidable. How do leaders address this fundamental challenge?



An Apostle's Test for Authenticity

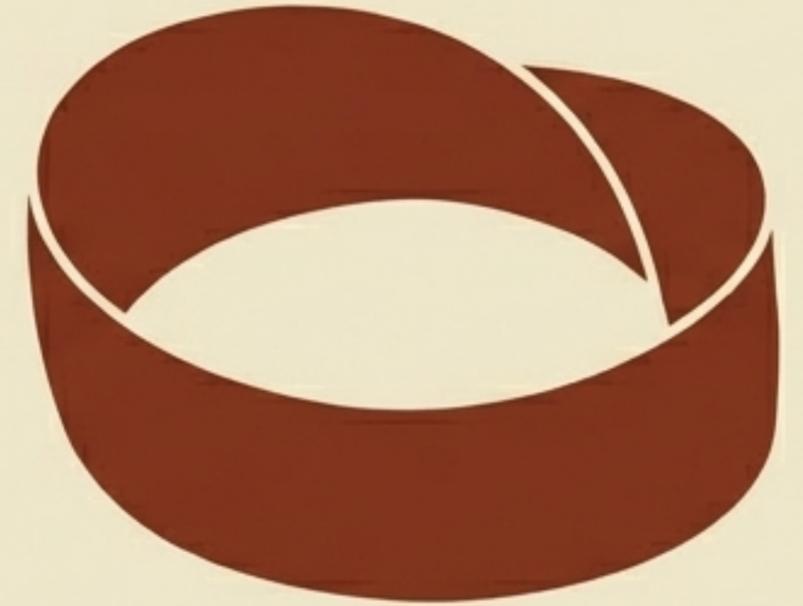
In response to how he differentiates his own thoughts from the Spirit, Dallin H. Oaks offered a personal test that reveals the complexities of this process.

“If I get an impression to do something I **don't want to do**, I think that's a lot **more authentic** than to get... an impression that I've been confirmed in what I wanted to do anyway.”

— Dallin H. Oaks

The Catch-22 of Confirmation Bias

- 1. It Undermines Moroni's Promise:** "If a confirmation of something you *want* to be true (like the Book of Mormon) is less authentic, it casts doubt on the primary conversion tool for members and investigators who are emotionally invested in a positive answer."
- 2. It Validates Revelation *Against* the Church:** "For a lifelong member conditioned to want the church to be true, a feeling that the church is *not* true would be an impression 'to do something I don't want to do.' By Oaks's own logic, logic, this feeling would be 'a lot more authentic.'"



The Ultimate Rule of Revelation

After discussing the challenge of personal bias, Elder Oaks provided the church's definitive, overarching rule for determining if a revelation is valid.

If we get an impression contrary to the scriptures, to the Commandments of God, to the teachings of his leaders , then we know that it can't be coming from... the Holy Ghost.

- Dallin H. Oaks

Personal revelation is only considered valid if it aligns with the current teachings of church leadership. It is not a tool for discovering independent truth, but for confirming institutional direction.

In Practice: “They Got It From the Wrong Source”

Elder Oaks illustrated the ultimate rule with a personal experience:

The Scenario:

A couple told him they received a revelation that they no longer needed to pay tithing or attend church.

Oaks’s Judgment:

“I don’t question your parents’ Revelation, but **they got it from the wrong source.**”

The Message:

There is no room for personal revelation from God that would lead a member to deviate from key institutional requirements like tithing or attendance. Any such feeling is, by definition, from “the wrong source” (i.e., Satan).

Testing the Rule Against History

If personal revelation is invalid when it contradicts leaders, what does that mean for members whose conscience put them ahead of the church on critical moral issues?

By this rule, your revelation was from the adversary if you believed...

- ...that the priesthood and temple ban on Black members was wrong **before 1978**.
- ...that the 2015 policy labeling same-sex married couples as “apostates” and barring their children from baptism was wrong **before it was reversed in 2019**.
- ...that DNA evidence showing Native Americans originated from Asia, not Jerusalem, was correct **at any point**.
- ...that the Kinderhook plates were a hoax **before the church admitted it in the 1980s**.

A Case Study in Dissent: The Lowry Nelson Letters

The Story

In the 1940s and 50s, BYU sociologist Lowry Nelson wrote to the First Presidency, arguing that the church's ban on Black members holding the priesthood was un-Christian and harmful.

The Institutional Response

The First Presidency wrote back, defending the ban as eternal doctrine.

Outcome

Nelson's "revelation" of conscience was condemned. The church would not "receive" the same revelation for another 30 years.

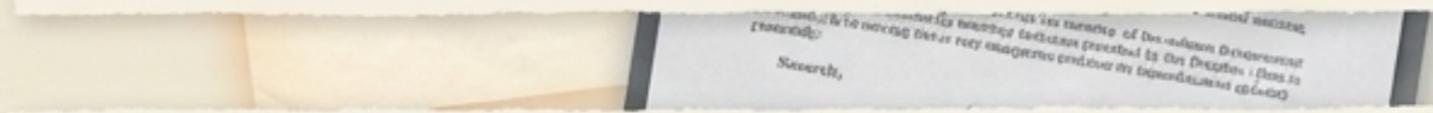


Dear Mr. Nelson,
I am a racist of the same order as
the majority whose way to follow is
throughout the world.

THE FIRST PRESIDENCY

They called his view of racial integration
**“a concept which has been most repugnant
to most normal-minded people.”**

- The First Presidency



Secret

A secretary added a personal warning:
**“When a member... sets himself up
against doctrines preached by the
Prophet... he is moving into a very
dangerous position for himself personally.”**

- A Secretary's Warning

The Final Equation

The doctrine of personal revelation has undergone a fundamental transformation from its original promise.

The Promise

Personal Revelation = Your direct, personal access to divine truth.



The Reality

Valid Revelation = Your personal confirmation of ~~divine truth~~
current church leadership.

Is the primary function of personal revelation in the modern church to help you find truth, or to ensure your obedience?