

**Preserving “True” Doctrine: How the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Uses
Technical Communication to Maintain Orthodox Thought**

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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter referred to as “the Church”) is a relatively young member of the world-wide religious landscape. Its comparatively rapid growth necessitates that some level of orthodox thought must be maintained among its members, Latter-day Saints or simply “the Saints,” in order to preserve the integrity of its organization and mission to carry the gospel message to all the globe. With the number of Latter-day Saints outside of the U.S. overtaking the number of the Saints within the U.S., it also becomes imperative to preserve the core teachings and principles of the Church in a variety of diverse languages, cultures, and geographic locales. In what may be an outgrowth of the resistance to U.S. government intervention against the Church’s practice of plural marriage in the 1800s (Smith, 2007), the Church in the 1960s developed a Correlation Committee (hereafter referred to as “Correlation”) to ensure homogeneity across Church publications, including the talks and speeches given by Church leadership at the twice-annual General Conferences. This study will seek to examine the effectiveness of Correlation in accomplishing its purpose and will compare its effectiveness to the efforts of non-Correlation groups, entities, publications, and movements to understand the ways that technical communication is used to maintain the orthodoxy of Latter-day Saint thought.

Definitions

An important aspect of technical communication is definitions. Establishing definitions allows one to control the terms in discussion, enabling the controller to dictate the rules and direction of discourse and its resulting thought. In this study, technical communication will be defined as “the discipline which employs the transmittal (or presentation) of needed information

to the intended audience by the means most effective for the audience to correctly understand what is being transmitted (or presented) to them” (Powelson, 2025). This more-or-less broad definition of technical communication will enable this study the autonomy to discern what is perceived by communicators as “needed information,” as well as to determine who a communication’s intended audience is. The effectiveness of a given communication can then also be analyzed.

One definition that the Church has attempted to transmit is the definition of *doctrine*. Currently, Church leadership states that doctrine is “[what] is taught by all 15 members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve. It is not hidden in an obscure paragraph of one talk. True principles are taught frequently and by many” (Andersen, 2012). A question naturally arises from this definition in view of this paper’s topic: is this view sufficient to account for all that the Church commits to being doctrine? The likely answer to that question is “no,” and so a more specific definition should be applied. This study posits that doctrine should be defined as:

teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints which are (a) found within or consistently extrapolated from the Latter-day Saint scriptural canon or (b) taught regularly by the majority of members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve from the introduction of a teaching to the present; a teaching originating with (b) should only be considered doctrine if it does not conflict with (a) irreconcilably.

From the lens of this new definition, we can account for the complex interaction between scripture, history, tradition, laypeople, and professionals that occurs in the Latter-day Saint maintenance of doctrine.

Grassroots Influence on Doctrine

What is here referred to as “grassroots influence” can be divided into three distinct, yet interconnected, categories: 1) culture, 2) tradition, and 3) enthusiastic amateurs. These three categories of influence function as a result of varying levels of technical communication. In the first case, culture has a tremendous impact on the way things are both communicated as well as perceived (Richards & O’Brien, 2012), thus requiring careful attention to the way communication is undertaken when engaged in a cross-cultural context (Weiss, 1998)—a context that the increasingly-global Church is regularly engaged in. Tradition strikes as the most subtle grassroots influence on doctrine, with the most potential to seep in from the top-down; people simply don’t know what they don’t know, and therefore the basic unconscious assumption is that what one knows must probably be correct—an assumption that even Church leadership is susceptible to. Enthusiastic amateurs step in as the motivating force behind bottom-to-top grassroots influences on doctrine. This force is comprised of typically laypeople, who earnestly engage in writing and publishing their own ideas, devoid of relevant academic training in theology or history, operating outside of the typical peer-reviewed, rigorous scholastic work that is one vehicle of technical communication that the Church supports for preserving orthodox ideas. In recent decades, several examples exist of these influences and of how the Church has responded to them using technical communication.

Culture

Cultural lenses or worldviews (Richards & O’Brien, 2012) are typically a result of the influence of the place and people that an individual grows up in and with. In the case of most early Latter-day Saints, and many who join the faith from other Christian traditions now, the cultural lens they view the world from is an American Protestant lens—a worldview steeped in dogmatic individualism. It is this worldview that even still pervades Latter-day Saint thought at

the popular level, in significant part because of the top-down influences of individuals like former Church President Joseph Fielding Smith, who had been steeped in that culture and adopted it as his own (Spackman, 2022; Spackman, 2024).

These top-down influences in the mid-to-late 20th century significantly impacted the culture of the Church, establishing a heavily American Protestant-esque worldview as the “approved” view of the Church leadership. Such views are only largely applicable in a Western Christian context, and their influence on Church doctrine is problematic for preserving the “correct” views established by Joseph Smith, Jr. during his tenure as President of the Church. In many ways, culture is the most difficult of the grassroots influences to root out; the simplest solution is to let those who hold to that culture “age out,” allowing generational cultural differences to supplant previous cultural views. However, this process requires significant oversight and guidance from cultural authorities, who can effect change so that the previous cultural views are not perpetuated in perpetuity. Such influence could possibly be seen through a study of the changes over time in messages and rhetoric from Church leadership to the youth and children of the Church, but such an examination is beyond the scope of this paper.

A possible breakdown in the Church-side process is Correlation itself, which has been known to adopt the cultural views that the Church leadership endorses—a prime example being the Church’s *Old Testament Student Manual* for the Seminary & Institute program, a manual which endorses Young Earth Creationism, anti-evolution perspectives on science, and concordist interpretations of scripture; views which are frequently in opposition to the more culturally-neutral views that the Church has typically held throughout its history. Though Correlation’s mission is to ensure homogeneity across Church publications, it is possible that

Correlation does its job too well, not enabling the Church sufficient freedom of thought in its own publications to challenge current Church culture that may be problematic.

A more immediate response to “incorrect” cultural views comes in the form of non-Church-sponsored publications; because the Church itself would be subject to backlash for commenting directly on culture, other influential entities are established in order to say essentially what the Church cannot. Publications that accomplish this task include academic journals, such as *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* or *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*; apologetics organizations such as FAIR – Faithful Answers, Informed Response; research institutions such as Scripture Central and The B. H. Roberts Foundation; magazines like *Public Square Magazine*; and online blogs, including *By Common Consent*, *Times and Seasons*, *The Mountaineer*, *Scriptural Mormonism*, and others. The success of these publications can be observed in the growing number of Latter-day Saint youth and young adults who participate more seriously in the intellectual side of religion, more frequently engaging with critics of the faith online and in greater numbers, as well as by the formation of student academic societies on Church-sponsored college campuses focused on gaining deeper understandings of correct doctrine and engaging in apologetics.

Tradition

Tradition—above deemed the most insidious grassroots influence on Church doctrine—is the hardest to detect of any of the influences. Rooting out “bad” or incorrect tradition requires significant scholarly efforts. Scholarly efforts alone, however, are not enough. Rather, to fully effectively disrupt an incorrect tradition requires that Church leaders introduce a more correct view to the Saints, typically over the pulpit. One prominent example, prominent in part because of its relatively low-stakes nature in relation to doctrine, is the story that developed around the

Latter-day Saint pioneers who experienced a harsh wintertime crossing of the Sweetwater River during the trek to Utah. For over a hundred years, the story had been promulgated that there were three brave, young men who heroically ensured the entire handcart company crossed the river successfully; due to their significant time spent in the water and freezing winter temperatures, all three of the named “rescuers” died to cold exposure after completing their work. As the story goes, Brigham Young reportedly wept like a child when he heard of their tale, and that Young publicly declared that the young men who died were guaranteed an everlasting salvation in the Celestial Kingdom (Thomas, 2009). This traditional narrative of the Sweetwater River rescue was so pervasive and oft-repeated that even President Gordon B. Hinckley repeated the story over the pulpit in the Latter-day Saint General Conference (Hinckley, 1981). Significant scholarly investigation of the story, however, led to the discovery that the traditional narrative, though faith-promoting, was largely disconnected from reality and instead of being history, was largely folkloric in nature (Orton, 2006). Teaching the newly-discovered, correct narrative proved challenging, meeting significant pushback from younger Saints despite still conveying meaningful spiritual principles (Thomas, 2009). It took significant time, as well as a Church leader sharing the correct narrative in a General Conference (Thomas, 2009), but there is a precedent established by the Church for accepting the work of scholars in correcting incorrect traditions—if not established prior to this event, certainly such precedent came into being here.

A more prominent tradition which developed into authoritative position and became justified through doctrine was the priesthood and temple ban instituted by Brigham Young on individuals of African descent. The ban was finally revoked in 1978 by an Official Declaration from the Church leadership, another form of technical communication wherein Church leadership declares authoritatively what the revealed will of God is for the Church and its

members. The 1978 Declaration is only the second of the Official Declarations to be given (the first had to do with ending the practice of polygamy in the Church), and both can be found in current editions of the Doctrine and Covenants.

Enthusiastic Amateurs

Where culture and tradition most commonly affect orthodox thought in the Church from the top-down, requiring efforts from those with higher status than the lay members to overcome on an institution-wide scale, enthusiastic amateurs affect orthodox thought from the bottom of the structure—infesting the lay membership with popular ideas that are rapidly circulated and accepted without much critical thought given them. While some of this negative ideological influence can originate with sources partial to new ideas, namely academic journals focused on the Church or Church-related topics, journal publications are typically more reserved than the amateurs who spread and popularize more exploratory ideas—assigning the ideas statuses of “truth” and “doctrine” in their enthusiasm. Such enthusiasm is not new in the Church; Church history begins with new ideas being enthusiastically spread and taught, namely the Book of Mormon and the teachings of Joseph Smith to the early Saints. New ideas of this kind *must* come from the Church leadership, though, to preserve the organizational integrity of the Church and to maintain orthodox status. One revelation recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants, for example, states that new revelations that are authoritative over the Church must come from the individuals that God has authorized as the leaders of the Church (Doctrine and Covenants 28). In this way, received revelation to the Church leadership is another form of technical communication utilized by the Church to preserve doctrinal integrity.

The Church leadership has not received revelation on every point of interest to the human mind, however. The Latter-day Saints do not possess any semblance of systematized theology; they rather follow the guidance of a charismatic authority with a well-established succession to prevent serious division. The communications Saints receive from Church leadership is what guides, then, the “established” doctrine of the Church; communications of this nature would also include intensive Church publications such as the Gospel Topics Essays and the Church History Topics overviews. These official publications are an attempt to utilize professional expertise to convey complex topics and information to the lay membership of the Church, the vast majority of which lack the relevant training to gain a deep understanding of such information on their own.

Subverting orthodox thought, though usually innocently, are publications from the lay membership that attempt to fill in the “gaps” where the Church has not taken an official position. Sometimes, this can lead to drastic consequences—such as the Vallow-Daybell murders influenced, in part, by the ideas produced in the book *Visions of Glory* (Eaton, 2023)—but most often they simply pull the lay membership out-of-line ideologically with the Church leadership. One instance that is rising in prominence is the apparent need among some lay members to identify Heavenly Mother, a Latter-day Saint deity considered to be the wife or consort of God, the Father, with a more specific and defined theological identity. A readthrough of the Church’s Gospel Topics Essay about Heavenly Mother indicates that we do not know much specific information about her, primarily because there is not a formal revelation to Joseph Smith about her. In the absence of such, several enthusiastic amateur movements exist to give her an identity. The identities currently popularly ascribed to her are Asherah (an ancient semitic goddess) (Butler, 2024) and the Holy Ghost. Some of these have limited scholarly speculation (see

Peterson, 2000 for Asherah; Allred, 1994 for the Holy Ghost), but lay members most often do not examine such ideas to the same critical extent as trained scholars, instead popularizing enthusiastic, but overreaching assertions that such things are “true” and “correct” doctrine of the Church.

The Church, as mentioned above, is somewhat limited in its response to such things through official technical communication channels. The preservation of orthodox thought is therefore reliant on more educated members to do the work of technical communication on behalf of the Church. One such response to the Heavenly Mother question comes from the B. H. Roberts Foundation’s Mormonr.org project. This project, an interesting artifact of technical communication, is designed to summarize “hard questions” by collecting, synthesizing, and summarizing as many primary sources as possible on a given topic. Their article, “Heavenly Mother,” assembles a stated 230 primary sources on the topic, and they present what is best described as the orthodox view on the subject (The B. H. Roberts Foundation, n.d.).

Conclusion

The Church faces difficulty in preserving orthodox thought, or “correct” doctrinal teaching, from a variety of sources. This study has presented a new definition of “doctrine,” and has examined three difficulties the Church currently faces in preserving it—culture, tradition, and enthusiastic amateurs—as well as discussed various avenues of technical communication that have been employed by the Church and by those who do not act in official capacity for the Church, but do contribute positively to its cause, in response to these three sources of difficulty. Further study might examine the nature of shifts in language use and the effect of those shifts on doctrine, as in the case of Doctrine and Covenants 131, as well as explore whether institutionalized statements of doctrine (similar to the creeds of mainstream Christian

denominations) would be beneficial to the Church in preserving “correct” doctrine, or if such statements would be subject to issues, as well—issues such as the shifting of language, cultural changes modifying interpretation, or an examination of the question of whether such statements would betray Joseph Smith’s views as presented in his “first vision.”

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