

Speaking with Authority

The Theological Influence of Elder Bruce R. McConkie

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By David John Buerger

Several years ago, a prominent LDS religious educator and I were discussing the intellectual history of Mormonism. We both agreed on the theological prominence of B. H. Roberts and Orson Pratt, after which he remarked: "Ask any ten Mormons on the street who is the Church's leading scholar today, and most—if not all—will say it's Bruce R. McConkie." I had to admit he was right. Elder McConkie has unquestionably been an influential spokesman for Mormonism during his thirty-eight year tenure as a General Authority. I recall with great interest the fact that as I was investigating the Church in the spring of 1973, Elder McConkie's book *Mormon Doctrine*, was the first LDS publication I pur-

chased after the scriptures. It came highly recommended by my peers.

Bruce Redd McConkie was born 29 July 1915 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He served in the Eastern States Mission during 1934-36, then returned to marry Amelia Smith, the daughter of President Joseph Fielding Smith, Jr., in 1937. Elder McConkie graduated from the University of Utah in 1937 with a bachelor of arts degree, and in 1939 received a bachelor of laws degree. His professional career included work as a U.S. Army security and intelligence officer, newspaper editorial writer, public official, and attorney. On 6 October 1946 he was sustained a member of the First Council of Seventy. During 1961-64 Elder McConkie served as President of

the South Australian Mission. He was sustained a member of the Council of the Twelve on 12 October 1972.

Out of the seventy-four general conferences held since Elder McConkie's call as a General Authority in October 1946, he has delivered a total of sixty-nine general conference sermons. With few exceptions, these sermons have dealt primarily with basic gospel themes (see figure 1). The three most commonly treated subjects

FIGURE 1: BRUCE R. MCCONKIE'S GENERAL CONFERENCE SERMON THEMES

THEME	N	%T
Joseph Smith Story/Restoration	15	21.7
Jesus Christ	10	14.5
Holy Ghost/Testimony/Revelation	8	11.6
Potpourri	7	10.1
LDS Church True	6	8.7
Chastity/Marriage	4	5.8
Priesthood/Authority	4	5.8
Missionary Work	3	4.4
Plan of Salvation	3	4.4
Book of Mormon	2	2.9
Death	1	1.5
Faith	1	1.5
Foreordination/Election	1	1.5
Justification	1	1.5
Prayer	1	1.5
Sacrifice/Consecration	1	1.5
Temple	1	1.5

include the Restoration, Atonement, and the Holy Ghost's role in testimony and personal revelation. Elder McConkie has deviated only twice in giving talks on more narrowly defined subjects: These were sermons on the law of justification and on the doctrine of foreordination and election. During the first twenty-five years of his service as a General Authority, Elder McConkie's main topical concern was Joseph Smith's first vision and the restoration of the true church of God.

Since the early 1970s, however, Elder McConkie's talks have often been multifaceted in nature, covering several basic subjects within the same sermon. His preoccupation with the Restoration during the 1960s was probably due to his perception that members of the First Council of Seventy should speak only on missionary-related topics. On the other hand, his calling as an Apostle in the early 70s might have been the catalyst to develop broader topics.

Nonetheless, it is clear that it has not been the particular topics Elder McConkie has chosen to address in his conference speeches, nor the breadth of subject matter, nor the originality of interpretation which has earned him his reputation. Instead, the Apostle's impressive influence stems, I believe, from (1) his sources of doctrinal influence, (2) his position as an Apostle, and (3) his authoritative tone.

SOURCES OF INFLUENCE

Elder McConkie's notable doctrinal eminence is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in his many published works. Clearly the most significant of Elder McConkie's books—at least for the

purposes of this essay—is his popular encyclopedia of LDS theology, *Mormon Doctrine*, first published in 1958 and recently rated among the ten best sellers by General Authorities in the history of the Church. Rare is the sacrament meeting talk or gospel discussion or lesson without some quote from its two-thousand-plus entries. *Mormon Doctrine* is not an interpretive study of those concepts which form the basis of LDS beliefs. Rather, it is a listing of any and all concepts, topics, or issues considered germane by its author. Accessibility is its hallmark. Most of its entries are quite terse; only a few receive extended attention. The four longest articles are Signs of the Times, Second Coming, Millennium, and Evolution. Interestingly, many of the articles do not actually discuss doctrine, but deal with historical or biographical topics.

In spite of its stature among Church members, this book was neither commissioned nor endorsed by the Church. Even its author does not claim that his is the official position on any given subject. Indeed, in 1960, the First Presidency commented that *Mormon Doctrine* "had been a source of concern to the Brethren ever since it was published," and "is full of errors and misstatements." They concluded, for a time at least, that the book should "not be republished even in a corrected form"—to do so "would be embarrassing to [Elder McConkie] and lessen his influence with the members of the Church." (David O. McKay Office Journal, 7, 8, 27, 28 Jan. 1960; Marion G. Romney to David O. McKay, 28 Jan. 1959.) Of particular concern was the assertion that the Roman Catholic Church was the "Church of the Devil" (pp. 108, 129). Other volatile articles on Catholicism, including Indulgences, Mariology, Penance, Supererogation, and Transubstantiation, were removed in his 1966 revised edition. Nevertheless, over eighty percent of the changes in this second edition involved cosmetic modifications which changed the tone but ultimately not the meaning of the book's content.

Such official opposition notwithstanding, the perception persists that Elder McConkie's *Mormon Doctrine* offers the definitive, even quasi-official stance on all doctrinal matters. The information in figure 2 may explain why. Almost half of the book's quotes belong to the Prophet Joseph Smith, representing approximately 33% of the total nonscriptural text cited in the book. The runner up was Elder McConkie's father-in-law, Joseph Fielding Smith. However, while Elder McConkie's references to Joseph Fielding Smith's books constituted about 29% of all nonscriptural references, actual citations from President Smith's books only comprised about 6% of the total lines cited in *Mormon Doctrine*. About 15% of the book's cited text came from Joseph F. Smith's *Gospel Doctrine*; almost 10% came from the *Lectures on Faith*. Clearly, most Mormons would consider these sources to be authoritative.

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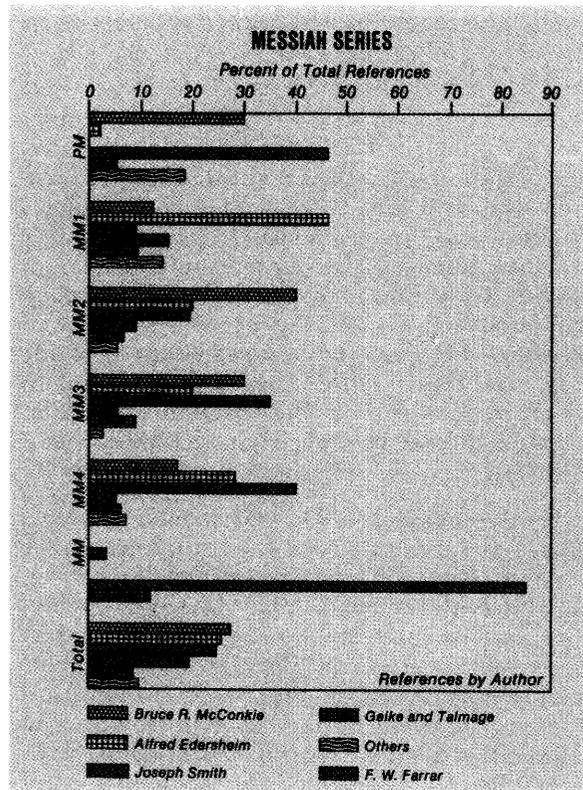
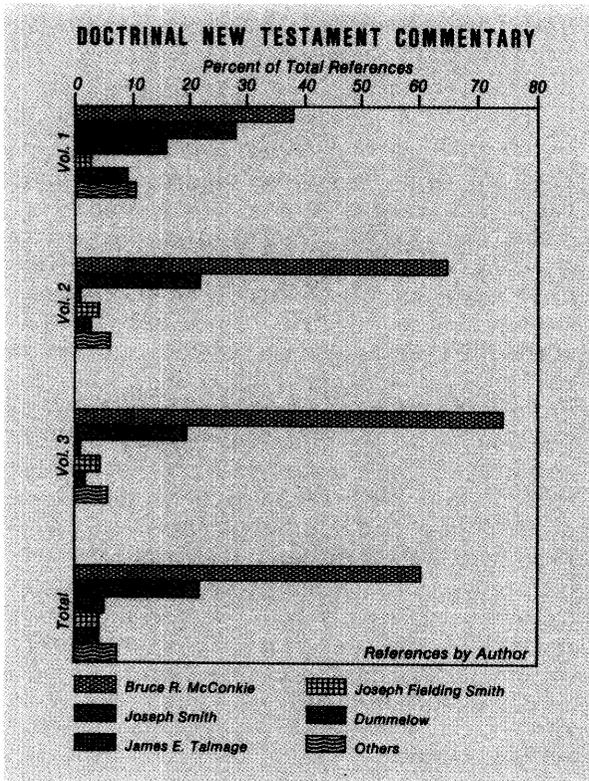
FIGURE 2: AUTHOR REFERENCES IN MORMON DOCTRINE

AUTHOR	BOOK	NO. OF REF.	CITATIONS	LINES CITED
Joseph Smith	Teachings	215	149	1,77C
Joseph Fielding Smith	TOTAL	178	17	326
	Doctrines of Salvation	146	9	130
	Man, His Origin and Destiny	20	7	193
	Progress of Man	4	1	3
	Way to Perfection	4	0	0
	Answers to Gospel Questions	1	0	0
	Essentials in Church History	1	0	0
	Restoration of All Things	1	0	0
	Signs of the Times	1	0	0
Joseph F. Smith	Gospel Doctrine	39	32	800
Joseph Smith, et.al.	History of the Church	27	19	349
Joseph Smith, et.al.	Lectures on Faith	22	21	521
James E. Talmage	TOTAL	16	8	168
Misc. G.A. Sermons		14	9	229
Misc. Catholic Citations		13	6	97
John Taylor	TOTAL	12	5	128
Milton Hunter	TOTAL	9	0	0
Catholic Encyclopaedia		8	6	251
Disc. of Wilford Woodruff		7	4	67
Bible Commentaries (several)		7	4	40
Franklin D. Richards	Compendium	4	4	66
Disc. of Brigham Young		4	2	56
B. H. Roberts	Outlines of Ecclesiastical History	3	3	89
	Hymns/Poems	3	3	83
Orson F. Whitney	Saturday Night Thoughts	3	3	29
Parley P. Pratt	Voice of Warning	3	0	0
George Reynolds	Are We of Israel	2	2	103
George Q. Cannon	Life of Joseph Smith	2	2	39
Miscellaneous References		16	8	177
TOTALS:		607	306	5,388
				(8.55% total lines in MD.)

Estimate 63,000 lines/375,000 words in Mormon Doctrine

Following the appearance of *Mormon Doctrine*, Elder McConkie's next major publication was volume one of his *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* in 1965 (hereafter DNTCI). This work, combined with the remaining two volumes of the series, essentially offers a line-by-line doctrinal interpretation of the entire New Testament. Because a good majority of the book's text consists of lengthy quotations from scriptures and other authors, it is helpful to consider the authorities upon whom Elder McConkie relies to defend his assertion. Out of 287 nonscriptural citations, it turns out that Elder McConkie's most oft-quoted source is himself. Approximately 37% of the citations are drawn from Elder McConkie's *Mormon Doctrine*, 26% from

Joseph Smith, 16% from James E. Talmage's books (many of which are quotes from biblical scholars cited by Elder Talmage), 8% from Dummelow's Bible commentary, with the balance representing about a dozen other authors. All of Elder McConkie's quotations of himself come from *Mormon Doctrine*. The next two volumes of his commentary reveal an even more interesting trend. As shown in figure 3, over 71% of the third volume's references are to Elder McConkie's own publications. Of this 71% figure, 21% of the references are taken from *Mormon Doctrine*, 11% from DNTC I, 37% from DNTC II, and 2% from DNTC III. A combined cross-tabulation of all three volumes reveals 60% of the total references come from Elder McConkie,



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22% from Joseph Smith, 4.5% from James-Talmage, 3.5% from Joseph Fielding Smith, 3.5% from Dummelow's commentary, and the remaining 6.6% from other sources.

A similar pattern may be seen in Elder McConkie's more recent series of books on the life of Christ, with a couple of variations. Figure 4 shows Elder McConkie's continued heavy reliance upon himself as a doctrinal authority with Joseph Smith coming in second place. Because he ventured out of a strictly doctrinal exposition in this series, Elder McConkie had to refer to other experts; his choice of authorities is quite revealing. The three biblical scholars used most frequently (even more frequently than James E. Talmage) were Alfred Edersheim, F. W. Farrar, and Cunningham Geikie. These men, incidentally, also served as Elder Talmage's chief biblical authorities in his book *Jesus the Christ*, first published in 1915. It is significant that all of these scholars' books were published in the late 1800s, their work (including Elder Talmage's) predating the full impact of the biblical higher criticism. One can't help speculate whether Elder McConkie consulted more recent non-Mormon biblical scholars or relied exclusively on his predecessor's work.

It is interesting to note that in Elder McConkie's last volume in the Messiah series—*The Millennial Messiah*—only 34 nonscriptural citations are made throughout the book's 726 pages. Of these, 85% are to Joseph Smith; only one reference is made to any of the author's other books.

Other influences on Elder McConkie may be seen in his recent doctrinal expositions. A good example is "The Seven Deadly Heresies," a talk

given on 1 June 1980 at BYU and unquestionably one of his most controversial. The Apostle's aim in this sermon was to correct what he perceived to be heretical thinking on the part of some Latter-day Saints. Specifically, Elder McConkie condemned the following ideas: (1) that God is progressing in knowledge and learning new truths; (2) that revealed religion and organic evolution can be harmonized; (3) that temple marriage assures those so sealed of eventual exaltation; (4) that the doctrine of salvation for the dead offers men a second chance for salvation; (5) that there is progression from one kingdom to another in the life to come; (6) that Adam is our Father and our God, the Father of our spirits and our bodies, and that he is the one we worship; and (7) that we must be perfect to gain salvation.

None of these points are original with Elder McConkie; each has been discussed at some length by previous General Authorities, most especially his father-in-law, Joseph Fielding Smith. Some agreed with Elder McConkie's positions, some opposed them. For example, Brigham Young's support for the idea of God's progression in knowledge has been well documented; the origin of Elder McConkie's dissent may be traced to President Young's contemporary, Apostle Orson Pratt. Elder Pratt's theological thinking also emerges in Elder McConkie's condemnation of Brigham Young's Adam-God doctrine. While Elder McConkie's adamant denial of progression from one kingdom to another is now usually held to be normative, none other than James E. Talmage suggested the contrary in his 1899 Mormon classic, *The Articles of Faith*.

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And Elder McConkie's unequivocal condemnation of the theory of evolution has been clearly shown to be but one of many differing beliefs held by General Authorities on the issue. (Perhaps to counteract his sometimes extreme manner of stating positions, the final published version of the heresies talk was substantially altered, indicating that Elder McConkie's spoken views were not to be understood as official statements of Church beliefs. His strong condemnation of organic evolution, for example, was prefaced in the published version by phrases such as "I believe," "My reasoning causes me to conclude that," and closed with "These are questions to which all of us should find answers. Every person must choose for himself what he will believe." [BYU *Speeches of the Year, 1980*, pp. 74-80.]

Another example of Elder McConkie's indebtedness to previous Mormon thinkers is his 2 March 1982 BYU speech entitled "Our Relationship with the Lord." Elder McConkie's purpose was to condemn the "chief and greatest heresy of Christendom" (i.e., Catholic and Protestant views of God) and to correct the heretical thinking of some Latter-day Saints who had enjoined gaining a "special relationship" with Jesus Christ. He described the Mormon view of the Godhead with its three distinct, divine beings and concluded with his characteristic directness: "you have been warned, and you have heard the true doctrine taught." (BYU *Fire-side and Devotional Speeches, 1982*, pp. 97-103.)

Whatever its applicability to the immediate audience, Elder McConkie's oration simply reasserted the Mormon view of the nature of God which had been reconstructed near the turn of the century. This systematized doctrine was first clearly enunciated by Elder James E. Talmage in *The Articles of Faith*, later finding official sanction in a doctrinal proclamation made by the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve in 1916.

The doctrinal authorities used in these speeches as well as in Elder McConkie's books clearly are perceived by most Latter-day Saints as proponents of mainstream Mormon theology. This seems especially true given that Elder McConkie's heaviest reliance is upon Mormonism's founder, Joseph Smith. Joseph Smith's theology, however, changed a great deal during his lifetime, starting with very conservative, Protestant-like interpretations of the Godhead (for example, the original versions of D&C 20 or the *Lectures on Faith*) and ending with very progressive, radical theological ideas seen in his King Follett Discourse. Joseph's theological spectrum was therefore varied, his ideas occasionally disparate.

The dialectical "thesis-antithesis" inherent in Mormonism's founder went through a preliminary synthesis in Parley and Orson Pratt's writ-

ings. The interpretation of Joseph Smith's theology remained open, however, and despite fundamental agreement on basic Mormon dogma, General Authorities sometimes differed in their overall approach to theology. This dialectical tension may be seen in cases such as President Brigham Young's progressive ideas on the identity and nature of God as opposed to Apostle Orson Pratt's more conservative understanding of the Godhead. LDS theologians James E. Talmage, John A. Widtsoe, and B. H. Roberts later provided a doctrinal synthesis which favored the progressive interpretation of the nature of God and man. Some aspects of this group's theology in turn evoked an antithetical reaction in the works of Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce R. McConkie. This contrast is especially pronounced in the two schools' discussions of evolution and eternal progression. While Elder McConkie's theological efforts agree with his predecessors on many, perhaps most, fundamental issues, his books and especially his recent BYU speeches clearly reveal an interpretation of Mormon doctrine reminiscent of Christian conservatism.

A HIGHER CALLING

Elder McConkie's position in the hierarchy has clearly added strength to the authority of his opinions. When President Smith died in 1972, Bruce R. McConkie was the sole remaining General Authority with a passion for theology. His elevation later that year to the Council of the Twelve reflected his growing popularity and solidified his position as doctrinal spokesman for the Church. Both the Church population and he himself seem to have accepted that mantle as his particular calling. In a 1980 letter to an LDS intellectual, he remarked, "It is my province to teach to the Church what the doctrine is. It is your province to echo what I say or to remain silent."

In addition, the apparent lack of interest in theology among other General Authorities has magnified the significance of Elder McConkie's work. Said he, in his 2 March 1982 speech at Brigham Young University, "It just may be that I have preached more sermons, taught more doctrine, and written more words about the Lord Jesus Christ than any man now living." Certainly Elder McConkie has published more theological books than any of his associates in the quorum. Beginning with his 856-page *Mormon Doctrine*, his three-volume *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, and recent six-volume Messiah series, Elder McConkie's books total 6,107 pages. By comparison, this total is almost two-thirds the number of pages contained in the twenty-six volume *Journal of Discourses*.

In addition, Elder McConkie's apostolic calling has extended his influence to the scriptural arena: with Elders Thomas S. Monson and Boyd

K. Packer, Elder McConkie served on the Scriptures Publication Committee which helped to guide the recent major revision of LDS scriptures. In addition to correcting errors in the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price, this committee produced a new topical index and reference system for the King James Bible, including extensive use of the Joseph Smith Translation. Significantly, the revised Bible Dictionary included some extractions from Elder McConkie's book, *Mormon Doctrine*.

THE VOICE OF AUTHORITY

Finally, Bruce McConkie's influence may be due in part to the authoritative tone he employs in his writing and preaching. A quality of adamant certitude and acrimonious criticism is evident in even his earliest productions. For example, in 1960, Elder McConkie penned an attack on a polygamous offshoot entitled, *How to Start a Cult: or, Cultism as Practiced by the So-called Church of the Firstborn of the Fulness of Times—Analyzed, Explained, and Interpreted; as also: Dissected, Divellicated, Whacked Up, Smithereened, Mangled, and Decimated; or, An Essay Showing Where All Good Cultists Go*.

Within a few years, however, this harshness had vanished. The tone of Elder McConkie's writings and sermons following his three-year mission in Australia (1961-64) is considerably subdued. It is interesting to speculate whether the change occurred as the result of a gentle chastening from that most ecumenical of recent prophets, David O. McKay, or some firsthand experiences with non-Mormons.

Though today the Apostle's tone is perhaps less acerbic, it is no less forceful. Indeed, while he often denies official approbation for his opinions, his tone conveys precisely the opposite. One is left with the impression that to disagree with him is to imperil one's eternal salvation. For example, his conference addresses—especially since his calling as an Apostle—frequently begin by bearing witness that "we are the servants of the Lord," and "I say this not of myself, but in the name of the Lord, standing as his representative, and saying what he would say if he personally were here." Elder McConkie's recurring references to the "many false and vain and foolish things [that] are being taught in the sectarian world" of "apostate Christendom" underscore his belief in the moral superiority of Mormon doctrine. The Apostle believes that people espousing these errant beliefs "have the intellect of an ant and the understanding of a clod of miry clay in a primordial swamp." And speaking to the "intellectuals without strong testimonies" who have fallen into heresy, he warns, "These, unless they repent, will live and die weak in the faith and will fall short of inheriting what might have been theirs in eternity."

Even taken together, however, his theological

sources, his position as an Apostle, and his authoritative tone do not completely account for Bruce McConkie's widespread influence. There is another answer less tangible but likely more compelling. William James may have said it best: "In the metaphysical and religious sphere, articulate reasons are cogent for us only when our inarticulate feelings of reality have already been impressed in favor of the same conclusion. . . . The unreasoned and immediate assurance is the deep thing in us, the reasoned argument is but a surface exhibition." (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 73.) The need for complex theological arguments and discussions seems to have diminished in the last few decades, especially at the level of General Authority. There seems to be a greater call for practical direction, strong conviction, and swift action than the development of a systematic theology. All of these Elder McConkie has been able to provide.

At the 1982 Mormon History Association conference, Professor Peter Crawley made the following significant observation:

Even though it is a revealed religion, Mormonism is all but creedless. . . . While certain doctrines are enunciated in the standard works and some doctrinal issues have been addressed in formal pronouncements by the First Presidency, there is nothing in Mormonism comparable to the Westminster Confession of Faith or the Augsburg Confession. Few of the truly distinctive doctrines of Mormonism are discussed in "official" sources. It is mainly by "unofficial" means—Sunday School lessons, seminary, institute, and BYU religion classes, sacrament meeting talks and books by Church officials and others who ultimately speak only for themselves—that the theology is passed from one generation to the next. Indeed it would seem that a significant part of Mormon theology exists primarily in the minds of the members.

Crawley went on to point out that "the absence of a formal creed means that each generation must produce a new set of gospel expositors to restate and reinterpret the doctrines of Mormonism." (*Dialogue*, Autumn 1982, pp. 20-21.)

Elder Bruce R. McConkie has risen to that challenge in this generation. Though his work is not original, revolutionary, sophisticated, or deep, he does offer certainty in a world which has become increasingly relative in its values. He provides simple answers in a world grown complex and chaotic. With his apostolic position and tone he guarantees the correctness of his positions for faltering Saints confused with alternatives. He invites Church members to lay down the burden of fighting the intellectual good fight: he will take up the sword against all enemies of truth (both without and within the Church) for us all. It is no wonder he resides in a position of such importance.

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