AN ESSAY ON TRUTH AND DISCIPLESHIP

THE ELECT ACCORDING TO THE COVENANT

Covenant Belonging and the Duty to Discern

An essay on covenant belonging, spiritual discernment, and the danger of collective blindness.

> *"We ourselves are on notice to beware."*

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There is a question that ought to trouble a covenant people.

Not destroy our confidence. Not make us suspicious of everything sacred. Not turn discipleship into cynicism.

But trouble us enough to keep us awake: THE GOVERNING QUESTION Can a covenant people fail to see what they ought to see?

The scriptures leave little room for a comfortable answer. Israel was a covenant people when it wandered. The Nephites were a covenant people when pride entered the Church.

Those who occupied “Moses’ seat” were a covenant people when the Savior accused them of attending carefully to religious particulars while omitting “the weightier matters of the law.”

The Restoration itself does not remove the warning. It intensifies it.

Joseph Smith’s rendering of the Savior’s Olivet prophecy identifies those endangered by deception not simply as “the elect,” but as “the elect according to the covenant.” Modern Church teaching has repeatedly interpreted that expression as applying to members of the restored Church. President Marion G. Romney drew the sobering conclusion:

> *“We ourselves are on notice to beware.” President Marion G. Romney*

Beware.

That is an interesting word for a covenant people. It does not mean distrust everything. It does not mean assume corruption. It does not mean hunt for failure. It means that covenant belonging is not permission to stop examining ourselves. Quite the opposite. Covenant makes the examination more urgent.

The Comforting Assumption

There is an understandable instinct within any religious community to protect what is sacred.

We know that human beings are imperfect. Therefore, when something imperfect occurs within the Church, we quite properly resist allowing human weakness to obscure divine truth.

A poorly delivered sermon does not invalidate the gospel. An impatient leader does not invalidate priesthood authority. An awkward meeting does not invalidate revelation. A mistaken decision does not make an entire organization false.

There is wisdom in learning to receive truth through imperfect instruments. There is wisdom in looking for goodness. There is wisdom in refusing to allow every disappointment to become an indictment. There is gold among us: enormous quantities of it. But a principle becomes dangerous when extended

beyond its proper boundary. From the true proposition: God accomplishes His work through imperfect people we can quietly migrate toward another proposition:

Therefore, when something within the covenant community troubles us, the faithful response is ordinarily to look past it toward the good.

Those propositions are not identical. And when the second becomes a cultural reflex, something important begins to disappear.

Discernment.

Gold and Dirt

Imagine religious life as panning for gold.

There is dirt everywhere because the Lord works through imperfect human beings. The wise disciple does not stare resentfully at the dirt. He washes it away, searches patiently, and rejoices when gold appears.

It is a beautiful metaphor. It is also incomplete. Its weakness lies in what it assumes before the examination begins. It assumes we already know which substance is dirt and which is gold. It assumes that the objectionable thing is merely incidental material surrounding something divine. It assumes that the disciple who concentrates upon the troubling material risks missing the treasure. Sometimes all of that is true. But sometimes the spiritual task is not merely finding gold in dirt. Sometimes the task is determining what is actually gold. Sometimes something glitters because it is gold. Sometimes something glitters because it resembles gold. Sometimes genuine gold appears beside something spiritually harmful. Sometimes the dirt itself contains information we are required to notice.

And sometimes what we dismiss as the imperfection of the vehicle has begun to alter what the vehicle carries.

The Savior apparently considered that possibility important enough to warn His disciples repeatedly about it.

He said:

> *“Take heed.”*
>
> *“Beware.”*
>
> *“Watch.”*
>
> *“Be not deceived.”*

Paul expressed the principle with remarkable precision:

> *"Prove all things; hold fast that which is good." 1 Thessalonians 5:21*

Notice the order. He did not say merely: Find something good and hold onto it. He said: Prove all things. Test. Examine. Discern. And then, having distinguished, hold fast to the good. Looking for good is therefore part of discipleship. But it is not the entirety of discernment.

When Positivity Becomes an Epistemology

There is a subtle difference between gratitude and discernment. Gratitude asks: What good has God given me here? That is a beautiful question.

Discernment asks: What is true? What is false? What is from God? What is merely human? What should be received? What should be corrected?

That is a different question. The two should live together. But trouble begins when the first replaces the second.

A disciple raises a difficult question about something said, taught, modeled, or done within the covenant community.

Instead of examining the substance of the question, the conversation moves elsewhere:

> *Why are you focusing on that?*
>
> *Why not concentrate on all the good?*
>
> *These are imperfect people.*
>
> *What are you looking for?*
>
> *Perhaps your past experience is coloring your perception.*
>
> *There was so much beauty there.*

Every one of those observations may contain truth.

This matters because a culture can unintentionally create an asymmetric standard of perception. The person who sees goodness is presumed to be seeing clearly.

The person who sees goodness and something troubling is asked whether pain, negativity, criticism, pride, resentment, or prior injury has impaired his sight.

But why should only one perception be examined? Pain can distort sight. Certainly. But loyalty can distort sight. So can belonging. So can affection. So can deference. So can optimism. So can institutional confidence. So can a deeply cultivated habit of searching deliberately for positive interpretations. Human beings are capable of false positives: seeing dangers that are not present. We are also capable of false negatives: failing to see dangers that are. A wounded disciple may misperceive. A comfortable

disciple may also misperceive. Therefore the question cannot finally be: Which person possesses the more attractive disposition? It must be: What is actually there?

When the Observer Becomes the Thing Observed

One of the most effective ways a culture can become resistant to correction is remarkably subtle. A substantive concern is raised. Rather than testing the concern first, the community begins examining the person who raised it. His history. His temperament. His wounds. His attitude. His tone. His motives. His relationship with leadership. His ability to forgive. His supposed preoccupation with problems. Soon the original question has almost disappeared. The observer has become the thing observed.

This can happen without malice. Indeed, it often occurs among exceptionally kind people. They do not wish to attack the person raising the concern. They wish to help him. They see pain and understandably desire his healing. They see conflict and desire reconciliation. They see darkness and want him to recover peace.

But compassion becomes dangerous when it is used, however unintentionally, as a substitute for examination.

A wounded man can be wrong. A wounded man can also be right. The presence of a wound tells us something important about the man. It tells us nothing conclusive about the proposition he has placed before us. If he says, “This happened,” the first question is whether it happened. If he says, “This principle was violated,” the first question is what the principle requires.

If he says, “Place this teaching beside these words of Christ,” then place them beside the words of Christ.

Only afterward should we ask what his wounds may be doing to his interpretation.

And intellectual honesty requires us simultaneously to ask what our own loyalties, experiences, hopes, fears, and habits may be doing to ours.

Anything less creates an epistemic privilege for comfort.

Christ Did Not Teach Us to Look Away

The Savior was not cynical. No one loved more completely. No one perceived goodness more perfectly. No one understood human weakness more compassionately. And yet no one in scripture demonstrates a stronger willingness to name what was wrong.

Matthew 23 is almost impossible to reconcile with a discipleship that equates spiritual maturity with concentrating primarily upon the positive.

Jesus acknowledged the authority occupied by the scribes and Pharisees (“Moses’ seat”) and then distinguished that authority from their conduct. He accused religious leaders of doing works “to be seen of men.” He accused them of neglecting “judgment, mercy, and faith.” He described them as capable of presenting an outward appearance of righteousness while something deeply different existed within.

He did not do this because He could not see the gold. He did it because truth required Him to see both. This is also why Matthew 6 is so important. The Savior warns His disciples:

> *“Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them.”*

He then directs the disciple toward secrecy:

> *“Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth.”*

And finally:

> *“Thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.” Matthew 6:1–4*

Suppose a sincere disciple hears a public religious story involving extraordinary personal generosity and these verses immediately come to mind.

That does not prove the speaker guilty of hypocrisy. The hearer cannot know another person’s heart. It does, however, create a legitimate scriptural question. What relationship does the Savior’s warning have to what we just heard? A covenant culture committed to discernment should be able to sit with that question. Perhaps careful examination will conclude that the teaching was entirely appropriate. Perhaps context resolves the tension. Perhaps the listener misunderstood. Perhaps the story should have been told differently. Perhaps both a beautiful principle and an unintended contradiction were present simultaneously. But the question itself must remain permissible.

If our first response instead becomes, “Why were you looking for dirt?” we have moved away from the text before allowing the text to interrogate us.

That should concern us.

“The Elect According to the Covenant”

The Joseph Smith rendering of Matthew 24:24 is significant precisely because it removes one of our easiest sources of false comfort.

The people Christ warns are not strangers to covenant. They are “the elect according to the covenant.”

Church teaching explicitly identifies the phrase with those who have made covenants with God, including baptized members of the Savior’s Church.

The warning therefore cannot mean: Be careful of deception everywhere except among us.

Nor does the phrase “if possible” provide permission for complacency. Protection is not portrayed as automatic institutional insulation. It is connected to faithfulness: to keeping covenant and hearkening to the Lord’s word.

President Romney’s formulation deserves repetition:

> *“We ourselves are on notice to beware.”*

President Joseph F. Smith employed another metaphor. He described deception as counterfeit currency: falsehood offered in the guise of truth.

That metaphor may be more useful than gold and dirt. Counterfeit money is dangerous not because it looks obviously worthless. It is dangerous because it resembles something genuine. The most spiritually consequential errors are often not presented as rebellion against Christ.

They may be wrapped in good intentions, familiar language, institutional trust, spiritual vocabulary, acts of service, personal testimony, stories of inspiration, visible sacrifice, or genuine accompanying goodness.

That is precisely why discernment is necessary. If evil always announced itself as evil, warnings about deceiving the elect would be almost unnecessary. The challenge is resemblance.

Goodness Does Not Cancel Error

There is a strangely persistent binary that sometimes appears in religious culture. Either a meeting was spiritually good or something troubling occurred. Either a leader is a good man or he acted wrongly. Either someone felt the Spirit or a practice deserves examination. Either an organization accomplishes extraordinary good or aspects of its culture require repentance. The scriptures know no such binary. A good man can be wrong. A true Church can contain false cultural assumptions. A legitimate priesthood holder can exercise authority incorrectly. A spiritually fruitful meeting can contain a poor teaching. A sincere testimony can include an unwise conclusion. A congregation can be blessed while simultaneously needing correction. In fact, Doctrine and Covenants 121 makes little sense otherwise. The revelation is not addressed to cartoon villains.

It teaches that when human beings receive authority there exists a nearly universal disposition toward unrighteous dominion:

> *“It is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion.” Doctrine and Covenants 121:39*

That is an astonishing doctrine. Almost all men. Not merely wicked men. Not merely apostates. Not merely outsiders.

And the revelation makes another disturbing observation: a man may become spiritually compromised "ere he is aware."

He may not know. That single phrase should make every covenant leader humble. It means sincerity is not enough. Good intent is not enough. Calling is not enough. Authority is not enough. Past spiritual experience is not enough. A person may need someone else to see what he cannot presently see. And that creates a corresponding obligation upon covenant culture: We must not make it unnecessarily costly to be the person who sees.

The Cultural Danger of "Imperfect People"

Few phrases are more true than this one: The Church is made up of imperfect people. And few truths can be more easily misused. Properly understood, the phrase creates patience. It restrains harsh judgment. It reminds us to forgive. It keeps ordinary human failure from becoming a crisis of faith. But improperly used, "imperfect people" becomes a universal solvent. Whatever happened? Imperfect people. Whatever pattern developed? Imperfect people. Whatever correction was resisted? Imperfect people. Whatever wound was inflicted? Imperfect people. Whatever scriptural contradiction was observed? Imperfect people.

Eventually the phrase ceases to explain human weakness and begins protecting it from meaningful examination.

The Restoration offers a much stronger doctrine. Yes, we are imperfect. Therefore we repent.

Yes, leaders are imperfect. Therefore they must receive counsel. Yes, institutions are administered by mortals. Therefore councils matter. Yes, perception is fallible. Therefore we test. Yes, we may be deceived. Therefore we beware. Imperfection is not an exemption from correction. It is the reason correction is necessary.

When Small Things Become Culture

Not every wrong is a great evil.

This matters. Much cultural drift begins with things so small that anyone objecting to them appears disproportionate. A phrase. A habit. An assumption. An unexamined leadership practice. A flattering story. A subtle elevation of office. A tendency to equate agreement with faithfulness. A reluctance to ask difficult questions. An instinct to preserve confidence rather than invite examination. No single instance appears catastrophic. Often it is not. But repetition forms expectation. Expectation forms norm. Norm forms culture. Culture eventually teaches without speaking. People learn which observations receive warm affirmation and which create discomfort.

They learn which questions are celebrated and which must first survive an inquiry into the questioner's heart.

They learn that positive perceptions are signs of spirituality while troubling perceptions require explanation.

Eventually almost nobody must explicitly say: Do not examine that. The culture has taught people not to see it. This may be one of the most subtle forms collective blindness can take. No conspiracy is required. No malicious leader is required.

No conscious suppression is required. Only enough good people responding in enough similar ways for long enough. Then the very goodness of the people involved can make the pattern difficult to recognize.

The Book of Mormon Does Not Flatter Covenant People

The Book of Mormon should make Latter-day Saints particularly resistant to the idea that religious belonging guarantees clear sight.

Its authors are relentlessly willing to describe corruption among people who possess truth. Pride develops among members of the Church. Priestcraft appears among religious communities. Authority is misused. The poor are neglected while religiosity remains visible.

The Nephites repeatedly move from righteousness to prosperity, from prosperity to pride, from pride to division, and from division toward destruction.

The lesson is unavoidable:

Scripture does not protect religious communities from examination simply because sacred things are present among them.

Sacred things increase responsibility.

"Lord, Is It I?"

Perhaps the healthiest sentence available to a covenant people is not: Surely we are safe. It may be: Lord, is it I? That question does not indicate weak testimony. It indicates humility.

The disciple who knows deception is possible does not spend all his energy identifying deceived people somewhere else.

He asks whether he could be among them.

The leader who understands Doctrine and Covenants 121 does not merely recognize unrighteous dominion in other traditions or former generations.

He asks whether some degree of it has entered his own leadership.

The congregation reading Matthew 23 does not merely congratulate itself for having escaped Pharisaic religion.

It asks whether religious appearance has ever become easier to preserve than judgment, mercy, faith, repentance, or truth.

The person hearing Matthew 6 does not immediately wonder which other person's righteousness is performative.

He first asks whether his own is.

And the disciple troubled by something within the Church must submit himself to the same discipline.

> *Could my pain be distorting me?*
>
> *Could resentment be speaking?*
>
> *Am I being fair?*
>
> *Do I want this criticism to be true?*
>
> *Have I represented the facts accurately?*
>
> *Have I sought God sincerely?*

Those are necessary questions. But covenant humility requires reciprocity. The listener must also ask:

> *Could my affection be distorting me?*
>
> *Could loyalty be speaking?*
>
> *Do I want this criticism to be false?*
>
> *Am I defending before I understand?*
>
> *Have I tested the claim itself?*
>
> *Have I mistaken comfort for confirmation?*

Only then do two disciples truly meet as equals beneath Christ.

The Person Who Sees Something Difficult

Pain complicates perception. But pain can also educate perception.

The person who has once experienced manipulation may recognize coercive patterns earlier than others.

The person who has been spiritually wounded may hear authoritarian language that passes unnoticed by someone for whom authority has always felt safe.

The person who has suffered exclusion may recognize the human cost of a cultural norm long before those comfortably inside it.

This does not make wounded people infallible. It makes dismissing their perception because they are wounded especially foolish. A scar can create hypersensitivity. It can also testify that fire burns. Therefore a covenant community ought neither canonize nor pathologize the wounded person's sight. It should listen. Then test. Then discern. Perhaps he is wrong. If so, careful examination can reveal it.

Perhaps he is partly right. Then charity can separate insight from excess. Perhaps he has seen something the rest of us missed. Then gratitude should overcome embarrassment. The objective is not to vindicate the critic. The objective is to come nearer to truth.

Charity and Correction Are Not Enemies

One reason difficult observations are resisted may be the mistaken belief that charity requires favorable interpretation at nearly all times.

Charity certainly "thinketh no evil." But charity does not require calling evil good. Nor does meekness require silence. Doctrine and Covenants 121 places extraordinary tenderness beside correction.

Priesthood influence is to operate through persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, love unfeigned, kindness, and pure knowledge.

And then the same revelation says:

> *"Reproving betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost,"*

followed by an increase of love. Correction and love are not presented as opposites. Proper correction is situated inside love. Indeed, there are circumstances in which refusing to speak may be easier than charity. Silence preserves social comfort. Correction risks relationship. Silence protects reputation. Correction may expose the speaker to misunderstanding. Silence allows everyone to continue believing that peace means health. But the Savior's peace was never purchased by refusing to name what required repentance.

A covenant people cannot become more Christlike by developing ever greater skill at avoiding discomfort.

What a Discerning Covenant Culture Would Look Like

A healthy covenant culture would not become suspicious. It would become teachable.

Leaders would not fear sincere questions because authority grounded in truth does not require insulation from examination.

Members would not assume that raising a concern demonstrates disloyalty.

The wounded would not automatically receive greater credibility, but neither would their wounds become grounds for discounting them.

Good experiences would be gratefully received without being used to nullify difficult ones. Spiritual impressions would be honored while remaining subject to scriptural and doctrinal testing.

Councils would do more than distribute assignments. They would provide places where competing perceptions could actually meet.

A leader hearing an uncomfortable observation might resist the natural impulse to explain it away and instead ask:

> *What are you seeing that I may not be seeing?*

A member receiving correction might ask:

> *Is there truth here that my pride makes difficult to receive?*

And the person offering criticism might ask:

What goodness am I at risk of losing sight of because I have become consumed by what is wrong? All three questions belong together. This is not relativism. Truth remains truth. It is humility about human access to it.

The Greater Danger

There are two obvious dangers in seeing religious imperfection. The first is cynicism.

A person can become so consumed by failure that goodness disappears from his field of vision. Every mistake becomes evidence. Every weakness becomes corruption. Every imperfect leader becomes suspect.

That is spiritually destructive. It should be resisted. But there is an opposite danger that receives considerably less attention.

A person can become so committed to seeing goodness that he gradually loses the ability to distinguish goodness from the cultural forms surrounding it.

He learns to interpret discomfort as negativity. Correction as criticism. Disagreement as disloyalty. Institutional confidence as faith. Pleasantness as charity. Silence as unity. Positive experience as evidence that no deeper examination is needed.

That is also spiritually destructive. The first disciple sees dirt everywhere and eventually believes there is no gold. The second sees gold everywhere and eventually loses the ability to recognize anything else.

Neither is discernment.

The Covenant Makes a Claim Upon Our Sight

Perhaps this is finally what it means to be "the elect according to the covenant." Not that we possess a status rendering deception impossible.

But that covenant places us under particular obligation to remain faithful enough, humble enough, and awake enough to resist it.

We have scriptures. Therefore we must allow them to interrogate us. We have priesthood. Therefore Doctrine and Covenants 121 must never become a scripture principally about someone else. We have prophets. Therefore the repeated prophetic injunction to beware must actually be taken seriously. We have the Holy Ghost.

Therefore we should be willing to test our own preferences rather than automatically baptizing them as inspiration.

We have councils.

Therefore differing perceptions should be welcomed rather than culturally filtered until only reassuring ones remain.

We have Christ.

Therefore His way, not institutional comfort, cultural habit, personal loyalty, positivity, pain, or preference, must remain the standard.

A covenant people should be among the hardest people on earth to deceive precisely because they have learned to examine themselves.

But if covenant belonging instead persuades us that serious error is unlikely among us, the very thing meant to awaken vigilance can become a source of sleep.

That is why Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:22 matters. The warning is not addressed merely to the wicked. It is addressed to the elect according to the covenant. And President Romney's conclusion remains wonderfully unsettling: We ourselves are on notice to beware.

Both

Perhaps the mature disciple eventually learns one small word:

Both.

There was gold. And something deserved examination. The leader is good. And he may be wrong. The Church is true. And its culture may drift. Authority is divine. And its exercise remains human. The wounded observer may be biased. And he may also see something others cannot. A meeting may be spiritually nourishing. And a sentence spoken within it may still deserve to be held against the words of Christ. Correction may hurt. And it may be charity. Unity matters. And unity purchased by refusing to see is not the unity Christ offers. The gospel is not threatened by this complexity. It is strong enough to contain it.

Indeed, the Restoration seems designed for it: continuing revelation, councils, repentance, correction, priesthood limitations, individual revelation, scripture, gifts of the Spirit, accountability, and repeated warnings against deception.

These are not features of a religion frightened by examination. They are features of a religion that assumes mortals will need it.

And so when one disciple sees gold and another sees gold and something troubling beside it, perhaps neither should immediately diagnose the other's heart.

Perhaps they should kneel together before the same King, open the same scriptures, and ask: THE FINAL QUESTION What is actually here?

Then have enough faith in Christ to accept the answer, even when the answer requires us to see what we would rather not see.

Scriptural and Teaching References

Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:22; Matthew 6:1–4; Matthew 23; 1 Thessalonians 5:21; Doctrine and Covenants 121:34–46.

President Marion G. Romney, warning that "we ourselves are on notice to beware," as quoted in Church study materials addressing Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:22.

President Joseph F. Smith's comparison of deception to counterfeit currency, falsehood appearing in the guise of truth, as quoted in Church study materials addressing the same passage.

The Book of Mormon's repeated treatment of pride, priestcraft, corruption, and spiritual decline among covenant peoples provides the broader scriptural pattern discussed in this essay.