

# The Gospel & The Church



The Best Conference Talk You Never Had  
the Chance to Read!

(Until Now)

By Elder Ronald E. Poelman of the First  
Quorum of the Seventy

**"Every Church member has not only the opportunity right, and privilege to receive a personal witness regarding gospel principles and Church practices, but has the need and obligation to obtain such assurance"**

**"When we understand the difference between the gospel and the church and the appropriate function of each in our daily lives, we are much more likely to do the right things for the right reasons."**

**-Elder Poelman**

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**themselves, whether their leaders  
are walking in the path the Lord  
dictates, or not."**

**-Brigham Young**

## **Introduction**

In October conference of 1984 Elder Ronald E. Poelman of the First Quorum of the Seventy delivered an address that was hailed by many members as one of the best conference talks they had ever heard.

But the following month when those members picked up the conference issue of The Ensign magazine to read the text of the speech, they were baffled to find that the words on paper bore little or no resemblance to the televised talk they remembered hearing the month before. What's more, anyone seeking the video record of Elder Poelman's talk would find that Poelman's segment had been pulled from the official Church archives and replaced with a counterfeit.

Thus one of the most interesting -and some would say most important- conference talks of the latter half of the twentieth century simply disappeared.

### **So What Was The Big Deal?**

There was nothing radical about the talk itself, although Poelman did touch on some concepts that had not been openly discussed in the church for a while. The address contained pearls of pure Mormonism; treasures of truth that could just as well have come from the lips of the prophet Joseph Smith during a conference at Nauvoo. Church members old enough to remember how things were in the 1950's said that listening to Poelman's talk took them

wistfully back to the days of President David O. McKay.

Before answering the questions of what it means, or why this talk was suppressed, let's first read the actual, original, talk itself.<sup>1</sup> When you read it for yourself be sensitive to the witness of the spirit, and see if these truths are carried into your heart. We have been given the gift of the Holy Ghost, and a way by which we can judge. Let us therefore test these words and find out for ourselves if they are true. As Alma taught " Now, we will compare the word unto a seed. Now, if ye give place, that a seed may be planted in your heart, behold, if it be a true seed, or a good seed, if ye do not cast it out by your unbelief, that ye will resist the Spirit of the Lord, behold, it will begin to swell within your breasts; and when you feel these swelling motions, ye will begin to say within yourselves—It must needs be that this is a good seed, or that the word is good, for it beginneth to enlarge my soul; yea, it beginneth to enlighten my understanding, yea, it beginneth to be delicious to me."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to someone on YouTube, the original address before the congregation in the tabernacle is finally available for viewing! [www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcM7koDc-jg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcM7koDc-jg)

<sup>2</sup> Alma 32:28

**Sunday Morning Session  
7 October 1984**

## **The Gospel and The Church**

*Elder Ronald E. Poelman of the First Quorum of the Seventy*



Compare with Ronald E. Poelman, "The Gospel and The Church," *Ensign*, Nov 1984, 64

Both the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Church of Jesus Christ are true and divine. However, there is a distinction between them which is significant and it is very important that this distinction be understood. Of equal importance is understanding the essential relationship between the Gospel and the Church. Failure to distinguish between the two and to comprehend their proper relationship may lead to confusion and misplaced priorities with unrealistic and therefore failed expectations. This in turn may result in diminished benefits and blessings and, in extreme cases, disaffection.

As I attempt to describe and comment upon some distinguishing characteristics of the Gospel and The Church, noting at the same time their essential relationships, it is my prayer that a perspective may be developed which will enhance the influence of both the gospel and the Church in our individual lives.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is a divine and perfect plan. It is composed of eternal, unchanging principles, laws, and ordinances which are universally applicable to every individual regardless of time, place, or circumstance. The principles and laws of the gospel never change.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a divine institution, administered by the priesthood of God. The Church has authority to teach correctly the principles and doctrines of the gospel and to administer its essential ordinances.

The gospel is the substance of the divine plan for personal, individual salvation and exaltation. The Church is the delivery system that provides the means and resources to implement God's plan in each individual's life.

Procedures, programs, and policies are developed within the Church to help us realize gospel blessings according to our individual capacity and circumstances. These policies, programs, and procedures do change from time to time as necessary to fulfill gospel purposes.

Underlying every aspect of Church administration and activity are the revealed eternal principles contained in the scriptures. As individually and collectively we increase our knowledge, acceptance, and application of gospel principles, we become less dependent on Church programs. Our lives become gospel centered.

Sometimes traditions, customs, social practices and even personal preferences of individual Church members may, through repeated or common usage be misconstrued as Church procedures or policies. Occasionally, such traditions, customs and practices may even be regarded by some as eternal gospel principles. Under such circumstances those who do not conform to these cultural standards may mistakenly be regarded as unorthodox or even



unworthy. In fact, the eternal principles of the gospel and the divinely inspired Church do accommodate a broad spectrum of individual uniqueness and cultural diversity.

The conformity we require should be according to God's standards. The orthodoxy upon which we insist must be founded in fundamental principles and eternal law, including free agency, and the divine uniqueness of the individual. It is important therefore to know the difference between eternal gospel principles which are unchanging, universally applicable, and cultural norms which may vary with time and circumstance.

The source of this perspective is found in the scriptures, and may appear to be presented in a rather unorganized and untidy format. The Lord could have presented the gospel to us in a manual, systematically organized by subject, perhaps using examples and illustrations. However, the eternal principles and divine laws of God are revealed to us through accounts of individual lives in a variety of circumstances and conditions.

In reading the scriptures we learn the gospel as it is taught by various messengers, at different times and places. We see the consequences as it is accepted or rejected, as its principles are applied or not, by varying degrees and by many different people. In the scriptures we discover that varying institutional forms, procedures, regulations, and ceremonies were utilized - all divinely designed to implement eternal principles. The practices and procedures change; the principles do not.

Through scripture study we may learn eternal principles and how to distinguish them from, and relate them to, institutional resources. As we liken the scriptures unto ourselves, (*1Ne. 19:23*) we can better utilize the resources of the restored Church to learn, live, and share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A favorite scriptural source for me is the Old Testament book of Leviticus. It is basically a handbook for Hebrew priests and contains many rules, regulations, rituals, and ceremonies which seem strange and inapplicable to us. It also contains eternal principles of the gospel which are familiar and very much applicable to everyone.

It is interesting and enlightening to read the nineteenth chapter of Leviticus, noting both the principles and the rules and practices.

In the first two verses we read, “And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto all the congregation of the children of Israel.” (*Lev. 19:1-2.*) Here is the principle of revelation. God speaks to his children through prophets. He does so today.

Continuing, the Lord said to Moses, “Say unto them, Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy.” (*Lev. 19:2.*) Many years later, Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, said, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” (*Matt. 5:48.*) Here is an eternal gospel principle.

There follow other eternal principles, some from the Ten Commandments. Also included are rules and programs intended to implement these principles among the ancient Hebrews in their particular circumstances.

For example, the divinely directed responsibility to care for the poor is taught. A program is presented, namely, providing food for the poor by leaving the gleanings of the crops and not reaping the corners of the fields. (*See Lev. 19:9-10.*) Current programs to care for the poor are much different. The divine law is the same. Yet another principle underlies both programs, ancient and modern: those being assisted are given opportunity to participate in helping themselves to the extent of their capacity.

In verse 13 the principle of honesty is taught, accompanied by a rule requiring employers to pay employees for their work at the end of each day. Generally, today that rule is not necessary. The eternal principle of honesty is implemented by other rules and practices.

Verse 27 contains a rule about personal grooming. It is clearly not applicable to us. However, we also have standards of dress and grooming. Neither is an eternal principle; both are intended to help us implement and share gospel principles.

The principle of forgiveness is set forth in the same chapter of Leviticus, verse 18, concluding with the second great Commandment, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,” with the added divine imprimatur, “I am the Lord.”

Every Church member has not only the opportunity right, and privilege to receive a personal witness regarding gospel principles and Church practices, but has the need and obligation to obtain such assurance by exercising his free agency, thereby fulfilling one purpose of his mortal probation. Without such assurance one may feel confused and perhaps even burdened by what may appear to be simply institutional requirements of the Church.

Indeed, it is not enough to obey the commandments and counsel of Church leaders. In response to study, prayer, and by the influence of the Holy Spirit we may seek and obtain an individual and personal witness that the principle or counsel is correct and divinely inspired. Then we can give enlightened, enthusiastic obedience, utilizing the Church through which to give allegiance, time, talent and other resources without reluctance or resentment.

Happy, fulfilling participation in the Church results when we relate Church goals, programs, and policies to Gospel principles and to personal eternal goals. When we understand the

difference between the gospel and the church and the appropriate function of each in our daily lives, we are much more likely to do the right things for the right reasons. institutional discipline is replaced by self-discipline. Supervision is replaced by a righteous initiative and a sense of divine accountability.

The Church should aid us in our effort to use our free agency creatively, not to invent our own values, principles, and interpretations, but to discover and adopt the eternal truths of the gospel. Gospel living is a process of continuous individual renewal and improvement until the person is prepared and qualified to enter comfortably and with confidence into the presence of God.

My brothers and sisters, by inclination, training, and experience most of my life I have sought understanding by the accumulation of facts and the application of reason. I continue to do so. However, that which I know most surely and which has most significantly and positively affected my life I do not know by facts and reason alone, but rather by the comforting, confirming witness of the Holy Spirit.

By that same Spirit I testify that God is our Father, that Jesus of Nazareth is the Only Begotten of the Father in the flesh, and that he is the Savior and Redeemer of all mankind and each of us. Through his atoning sacrifice, redemption and exaltation are offered as a free gift to all who will accept by faith, repentance, and sacred covenants.

May each of us continue to learn and apply the eternal principles of the gospel as revealed in the scriptures by utilizing fully and appropriately the resources of the Church.

In the words of the Nephite leader Pahoran “May [we] rejoice in the great privilege of our church, and in the cause of our Redeemer and our God.” (*Alma 61:14.*) In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

The key to understanding these inspired words, and the reason it was suppressed, is because of the otherwise simple observation that: the Gospel is independent of the Church and the church is true only in as much as it remains true to the principles of the Gospel. Elder Poelman began his talk by reminding the congregation that there is an important difference between the Gospel and the Church. "There is a distinction between them which is significant", he said, "and it is very important that this distinction be understood."

Elder Poelman cautioned that failure to distinguish between the two, and to comprehend their proper relationship, could lead to "confusion and misplaced priorities". The gospel, he explained, is the substance of the divine plan for personal, individual salvation and exaltation. The Church, on the other hand, is supposed to be the delivery system that provides the means and resources to implement that plan.

As Elder Poelman explained it, the *Gospel* of Jesus Christ is eternal and unchanging. The *Church* of Jesus Christ is not. "Policies, programs, and procedures do change from time to time as necessary to fulfill gospel purposes."

"When we understand the difference between the gospel and the church and the appropriate function of each in our lives, we are much more likely to do the right things for the right reasons."

Elder Poelman admonished us to remain mindful that every church member has not only the right, but also the obligation to exercise his free agency and receive a personal witness not only of gospel principles, but also of Church practices. "In response to study, prayer and by the

influence of the Holy Spirit we may seek and obtain an individual, personal witness that the principle or counsel is correct and divinely inspired” or not.

According to Elder Poelman, the ultimate goal of each of us should be to eventually get to that point in our spiritual and intellectual growth where we will no longer need the institutional Church in our lives. Here is how Elder Poelman put it: “As individually and collectively we increase our knowledge, acceptance, and application of gospel principles, we become less dependent on Church programs. Our lives become Gospel centered.”

To most of us listening, Elder Poelman's reminder was consistent with what we had been taught all our lives growing up. Didn't Brother Joseph preach similar distinctions? Are we not on our individual paths to perfection? At some point in our progress shouldn't we expect to no longer require someone holding our hand?

There has been a subtle shift in the way some in the Church hierarchy have come to view their relationship to the rank and file membership. The once pre-eminent doctrine of *free agency* has been, “de-emphasized” in LDS teachings for almost four decades now. Joseph Smith's view that his role was to “teach the people correct principles and let them govern themselves”<sup>3</sup> has been supplanted by the relatively new dogma that asserts obedience as the first law of the church. It goes without saying that we ought to render obedience to God, but more often than not these days what is expected is unquestioning obedience to Church leaders, whether they are right or not.

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<sup>3</sup> As Quoted by John Taylor, in the *Journal of Discourses*, 10:57-58

This key distinction, necessary for exaltation, that gospel principles and ordinances are eternal and unchanging and that the Church is subservient to, and distinct from, the Priesthood of God, has been lost. Understanding this distinction makes us realize our own personal responsibility to obey the Lord's commandments, even when the leaders of the church do not. It awakens in us the realization that it is our duty to oppose church leaders who change ordinances or disregard commandments, rather than obey them in their rebellion against God. In short it places our loyalty to God first and to church leaders second, and thus undermines the attempts at unrighteous dominion being made by church leaders.

The leaders of the church feared that this would undermine their power over the members. Therefore, before the Ensign was published, or even the video record of conference was archived, this excellent talk by Elder Poelman was edited out and replaced by a sermon on the value of unquestioning obedience to church leaders, and the preeminence of the church hierarchy in all aspects of life.

L. Jackson Newell described the changing of our doctrine, and the editing of Elder Poelman's talk, like this: "The text was not edited -his ideas were turned inside out." Indeed. Poelman's conference address, "originally a rare and inspiring defense of free agency became yet another cry for blind obedience."<sup>4</sup>

In this way the mainstream belief has mutated from a belief in "The Gospel *And* The Church" To the idea that "The Gospel *Is* The Church." So it was that the entire meaning of Elder Poelman's inspired dissertation was palpably inverted.

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<sup>4</sup> An Echo from the Foothills: To Marshal the Forces of Reason *Dialogue, a Journal of Mormon Thought* Vol. 19 Issue 1 p.28 by L. Jackson Newell

Poelman's statement that "the orthodoxy upon which we insist must be founded on fundamental principles and eternal law, including free agency and the divine uniqueness of the individual," became this: "The orthodoxy upon which we insist must be founded in. . . direction given by those authorized in the Church." Every reference to free agency in the original was deleted except one, and that had been altered to imply that free agency is only effective under Church aegis!

The new version completely eradicates any distinctions between the church and the gospel. One would get the impression from Elder Poelman's new talk that the church and the gospel are one and the same. In the redacted version, allegiance to the corporation had become no less important than adherence to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Church can provide us with spiritual sustenance. But the Church is not the gospel. The Church is merely the vehicle that was commissioned to deliver that sustenance. As Elder Poelman insisted, it is very important that this distinction be understood.

Many of our testimony meetings are filled with the curious practice of a lot of members bearing testimony of the delivery system while virtually ignoring the plain and precious truths being delivered by that system. Is it not more than a little ridiculous, once one understands the distinction between eternal gospel principles and the changing institutions and policies of men, a.k.a. the church, to hear people say: "I know the church is true!" rather than saying: "I know the gospel is true!"?



It is loyalty to principle that must be our standard, not loyalty to the church. If we abdicate our agency to others, even if we are often led right, we fall short of the blessings God has in store for us. Brigham Young taught this principle in these words:

"What a pity it would be if we were led by one man to utter destruction! Are you afraid of this? I am more afraid that this people have so much confidence in their leaders that they will not inquire for themselves of God whether they are led by Him. I am fearful they settle down in a state of blind self-security, trusting their eternal destiny in the hands of their leaders with a reckless confidence that in itself would thwart the purposes of God in their salvation, and weaken that influence they could give to their leaders, did they know for themselves, by the revelations of Jesus, that they are led in the right way. Let every man and woman know, by the whispering of the Spirit of God to themselves, whether their leaders are walking in the path the Lord dictates, or not. This has been my exhortation continually. . . .

"Let all persons be fervent in prayer, until they know the things of God for themselves and become certain that they are walking in the path that leads to everlasting life; then will envy, the child of ignorance, vanish, and there will be no disposition in any man to place himself above another; for such a feeling meets no countenance in the order of heaven. Jesus Christ never wanted to be different from his father: they were and are one. If a people are led by the revelations of Jesus Christ, and they are cognizant of the fact through their faithfulness, there is no fear but they will be one in Christ Jesus, and see eye to eye."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 9, p. 150, 12 January 1862

As members strive to live the gospel of Jesus Christ, and simultaneously struggle to navigate the subculture of the church, it can be difficult to overcome the cognitive dissonance between the teachings of the prophets and some of the statements of current leaders. I exhort you not to lose faith in the gospel; Jesus Christ knows your name and your heart, if you strive to serve him he will lead you home. There will come a time, or perhaps that time has already come, in your life when you face a crisis of faith. I hope when faced with this crisis you will remember who it is that is the only sure foundation of your faith: Jesus Christ. As the scriptures teach us: "And now, my sons, remember, remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation; that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds, yea, his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you to drag you down to the gulf of misery and endless wo, because of the rock upon which ye are built, which is a sure foundation, a foundation whereon if men build they cannot fall." (*Helaman 5:12*)

To build your testimony on others, even on the president of the church, is to build on the sand. But the rock of your redeemer will never fail you. If you need help navigating the waves and winds of doctrine, I hope that you will contact us before you lose faith. Give the Spirit the chance to renew your faith, and he will not disappoint you, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

In this little booklet we hope you will find greater understanding by learning of the distinction between the unchanging gospel of Jesus Christ and His ever changing Church. This is a distinction of vital importance for us to have a proper understanding of God's plan for us. We hope that these words will help you to dispel misunderstandings and develop faith in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

This booklet is published by Christ's Church. We are a small group of Latter-Day Saints who are striving to keep all of the Lord's commandments by gathering into consecrated communities, building temples where all the original ordinances are still performed, and sending our missionaries to preach the gospel and gather Israel for the last time. If you are striving as we are to build Zion, then I hope we can meet with you.

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May God bless you as you search to know Him.

