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Meaning of “Faith” — *pistis*

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In Moroni 7, Mormon teaches his “beloved brethren” (probably *hesed*, equivalent to the Greek *philadelphia*) that the next steps after becoming a “peacemaker” are to become the very personifications of the great triumvirate faith, hope, and charity. He explains each, using the same meanings as are found in the New Testament.

In their simplest form in our culture, faith, trust, hope, and belief mean essentially the same thing. They are the quality of mind that prevents us from going mad: the stability that comes from accepting the past as evidence of the continuity of the future. Examples are as simple as turning on a light switch because one expects there will be light, or as complex as sitting comfortably in a building without being concerned that the world outside has suddenly gone away. One cannot see that world from within the walls of the building but feels secure because the world has never gone away before. Similarly, people of all cultures and beliefs have faith in their God because there is a constancy or at least a repetition of physical and emotional phenomena that cannot be explained otherwise. One reads the scriptures, believes he understands who God is, and has faith that God will act in accordance with that belief. The Prophet Joseph describes that kind of faith in the first lecture in *Lectures on Faith* as “the assurance which men have of the existence of things which they have not seen, and the principle of action in all intelligent beings.”⁹¹⁹ If we did

⁹¹⁹ Smith, *Lectures on Faith*, Lecture 1:9.

The prophet Joseph was responsible for, but not the author of all of the lectures, as Dahl explains in “Authorship and History of the Lectures on Faith” (Larry E. Dahl and Charles D. Tate, Jr., eds., *The Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective* (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1990), 8-10.

One of the authorship studies of the Lectures on Faith was done by Alan J. Phipps as a master's thesis in 1977. He compared the frequency of use of certain "function words" in the Lectures with the use of the same words in the writings of several persons who may have had a hand in writing the Lectures, ie, Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, William W. Phelps, and Parley P. Pratt. He concludes: The study showed that Sidney Rigdon's use of function words corresponded very closely with that in Lectures One and Seven, and fairly well with Two, Three, Four, and Six. Joseph Smith's use of function words matched closely those in Lecture Five, with some evidence of his having co-authored or edited Two, Three, Four, and Six. . . . The data and tests appear, therefore, to assign the authorship of the Lectures on Faith mainly to Sidney Rigdon, with Lecture Five and perhaps some parts of the other lectures, except One and Seven, to Joseph Smith (66-67).....

Conclusions About Authorship

What then can we conclude about authorship of the Lectures on Faith? It is clear that several

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not have that kind of emotional stability, we would be so disorientated that we could perform no action at all.

However, by the end of the *Lectures* he has expanded the meaning so that it carries the same connotation as *pistis* in the New Testament. He writes “that faith was the principle of action and of power in all intelligent beings, both in heaven and on earth,”⁹²⁰

It would be interesting to know what Hebrew word Mormon used and Joseph translated as “faith” in the Book of Mormon. In our Old Testament, the word “faith” is found only twice.⁹²¹ Otherwise, the Hebrew word translated in those two places as “faith” is translated as “trust” throughout in the Old Testament.

That works well because trust, like the Greek word translated “faith,” is always based on the expectation of the fulfillment of a covenant. The covenant may be implicit like the mutual trust between friends, or explicit like a legal contract, but it must always be in place if the trust is founded on rational principles. For if there were no covenant or agreement, there could be no reasonable exception, and therefore, no evidence or assurance in which one can place one’s trust. The early Israelites’ trust in God was based on their covenants with God, but the word translated as “trust” also presupposes that both parties will keep their part of the covenant.

In the New Testament, “faith” is translated from the Greek word *pistis*, which is all about making and keeping covenants. In Paul’s time, *pistis* was not a religious term.⁹²² It

of the brethren participated in writing them. It is also clear that Joseph Smith and perhaps others prepared them for publication after they were written. Undoubtedly, the Lectures were, in the words of President John Taylor, “published with the sanction and approval of the Prophet Joseph Smith” (Woodford 1:87). It would therefore seem appropriate to attribute the ideas, principles, and doctrines in the Lectures on Faith to the Prophet Joseph.

⁹²⁰ Smith, *Lectures on Faith*, Lecture 7:2.

⁹²¹ Deuteronomy 32:20 and Habakkuk 2:4.

⁹²² New Testament writers often avoided using in-vogue religious terms when teaching the new gospel. LDS missionaries do the same. For example, in the South, missionaries avoid using the phrase “born again.” That is a powerful and very important scriptural concept, but it is a phrase Mormons cannot use when doing missionary work in the Southern States because the Baptists and others have already defined it their way. If Mormon missionaries used that phrase when speaking to those people, “born again” would be understood according to the hearer’s prior learning, and unless the missionary laboriously redefined it, his words would be understood according to their usage, so when Mormons discuss being “born again” we speak of becoming a son or daughter of God.

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was used either as a diplomatic word that had to do with making a treaty, or else as an economic term that had to do with securing the validity of a contract.⁹²³ *pistis* did not actually refer to the conditions of the contract, but rather to its object and to the evidence that the contract was binding.⁹²⁴

Friedrich's ten volume *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* has more than 40 pages discussing *pistis* and related Greek words. In his primary definition of *pistis*, Friedrich wrote:

Stress is often laid on the fact that this is a higher endowment than wealth. ... Concretely *pistis* means the "guarantee" which creates the possibility of trust, that which may be relied on, or the assurance of reliability, "assurance". ... *pistis* is the "oath of fidelity," "the pledge of faithfulness," "security." This leads on the one side to the sense of "certainty," "trustworthiness," on the other to that of "means of proof," "proof." In particular *pistis* denotes the reliability of persons, "faithfulness." *It belongs especially to friendship.*⁹²⁵

Much of the remainder of Friedrich's definition shows the chronology of the evolution of the word's meaning. He begins by giving the classic definition of *pistis* as the intent of the contract and the evidence upon which trust is based. Then he shows how that meaning has changed over the years. Early Christians shifted the focus of *pistis* to a religious term, and in time reduced it to mean simply believing without any further reference to either the covenant, its object, or its evidence. Consequently, in today's common usage the meaning of "faith" often slides along a continuum that ranges from wishing hard to just anticipating

⁹²³ "The words [beginning with] *pist-* did not become religious terms in classical Greek. . . . Nor did *pistis* become a religious term. At most one can only say that the possibility of its so doing is intimated by the fact that it can refer to reliance on a god." (Gerhard Friedrich, ed., trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1964-1976], article about *pistis*, 6:179).

⁹²⁴ Friedrich gives a further definition: "Stoic Usage: Primarily, then, *pistis* is an attitude of man to himself, not to others. As Man's faithfulness to himself, however, *pistis* makes possible a right relation to others. He who is *pistos* = 'faithful' to himself, can also be *pistos* = 'faithful' to others; he alone is capable of genuine friendship. (Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 6:182)

⁹²⁵ Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 6: 177. In the text *pistis* is written in Greek letters. In this quote *pistis* is written in italics. In the last sentence emphasis is added.

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without any substantiating covenant to support the anticipation.

Because our most common meaning for “faith” tends to be entirely different from the way the authors of the New Testament used *pistis*, when we read “faith” in the scriptures we may superimpose the new meaning onto the scriptural text and miss the author’s intent altogether.

Paul defined *pistis* with succinct precision when he wrote:

Now *pistis* [our Bible translation reads “faith”] is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1).

There, as elsewhere in classic Greek, *pistis* is a compound of two parts. First is the “substance” that is the object or intent of the covenant. Second is the evidence that the covenant is in place and binding.

In Lecture One of the *Lectures on Faith*, Joseph quoted Paul but used “assurance” rather than “substance.”⁹²⁶ Both Paul and the Prophet Joseph got it absolutely right. The Prophet Joseph did not change the meaning of faith when he changed “substance” to “assurance.” Joseph’s “assurance” focuses on the spiritual intent of *pistis*, while the King James Version’s “substance” focuses on its visible or tangible intent. When the substance (object, or intent) is something one can see (as in purchasing a bike or removing a mountain), then the bike or the mountain is the substance. But when the covenant is about one’s own salvation, and the substance is one’s Self, then Joseph’s “assurance” carries the more accurate connotation.

There are five parts of Paul’s definition of *pistis*. Three are stated. Two are implied because they are obviously so necessary that they are simply presupposed.

1. (presupposed) There must be a covenant or contract that defines the agreement and the methodology by which it will be accomplished.

2. There must be a mutually understood “substance,” that is the object, objective, purpose, assurance, or intent of the covenant.

3. There must be binding “evidence” (a handshake, signature, or appropriate other token or tokens) that validates the agreement and guarantees the fulfillment of the covenant.

⁹²⁶ *Lectures on Faith*, 1:8. see JST Hebrews 11:1. “Assurance” is also one of the synonyms that Friedrich uses in the above quote.

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4. The next is a functional “hope.” That is, taking the covenant at full value and acting or living as though the terms of the covenant were already fulfilled.

5. (implied) Finally, the conclusion or fulfillment of the terms of the covenant.⁹²⁷

pistis always implies such a covenant and covenantal process—whether formal and explicit, or informal and implicit—a covenant is always an integral part of *pistis*.

There must always be an adequate “evidence” that affirms the terms of the covenant are agreed upon by both parties and therefore binding on both. Between friends it is the “oath of fidelity,” the spoken words that guarantees trust, perhaps a code word or even a hug. Or it may be something more tangible such as a ring, a diadem, or written contract with a signature—but it is always something. In a modern court of law, raising the right hand to the square is legal assurance that one has sworn to tell the truth. Anciently, exchanging covenant names or name-titles was a token of a covenant, an evidence of fidelity. *pistis* is not the act of trusting, but rather it is the confirmation by which one may trust.

A simple example is this: If Albert wished to buy Tom’s bicycle for \$50 and Tom wished to sell it to him, they would settle on the terms and shake hands to seal the agreement. In that example, the covenant is the agreement. The “substance of things hoped for” are bike and money. The “evidence of things not seen” is the handshake. They will make the exchange the next day. The bike is old and needs paint so that same afternoon *before* he gets the bike, Albert goes to the store and buys the paint and whatever else is necessary to repair it. Purchasing the paint on the assurance that the agreement is effectual and the covenant will be fulfilled is “hope.” Hope is living as though the covenant was already fulfilled.

Let us give you an example where “faith” is used in Book of Mormon the same way that *pistis* is used in the New Testament. Pretend you are an artist who wishes to create a painting depicting this verse:

For the brother of Jared said unto the mountain Zerin, Remove – and it was

⁹²⁷ Bauer defines *pistis* as having three parts:

“1. That which causes trust and faith—faithfulness, reliability

“2. Solemn promise, oath

“3. Proof, pledge”

(Walter Bauer, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

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removed. And if he had not had faith it would not have moved; wherefore thou workest after men have faith (Ether 12:30).

As you begin to sketch, you must decide three things: (1) Who is the brother of Jared talking to? Is he praying to God or is he addressing the mountain? (That's easy—the scripture reads, he “said unto the mountain.”) (2) Is he kneeling or standing? And (3) does he have his fingers crossed to show he is wishing really hard, or is he holding his arm in an attitude of priesthood authority. The way you choose to paint him will be the way you define his faith.

We have no more of the story than what is in that verse, but we suppose what happened is that the Lord told the brother of Jared that the mountain was in the way, and then made a covenant that he would move the mountain when the brother of Jared was ready to have it moved. In our imaginary painting of the brother of Jared, he is standing. Moving the mountain and creating a path where the mountain used to be are the objects or the “substance” of the covenant. The way he holds his arm and the words he speaks—in righteousness—are the “evidence.” So the mountain moves. For the brother of Jared, the evidence is in the operative power of his own words and actions—but the real power comes from the Lord's fulfilling his part of the covenant in accordance with the conditions already agreed upon. That means we read the verse this way:

For the brother of Jared said unto the mountain Zerim, Remove—and it was removed. And if he had not had faith [that is, if he and the Lord had not made the covenant, and if he had not received appropriate instructions and evidences from the Lord; then, if he had not acted according to the conditions of the covenant] it would not have moved; wherefore thou [God] workest after men have faith (Ether 12:30).

That is, God works after he has made a covenant, its purpose defined, and appropriate evidences given and received. People cannot simply decide on the purpose, assume the covenant, and invent the evidences. If we presumed to do that, we might stand here shouting at Utah's mountains until doomsday, and they wouldn't move at all.

A more important example is this: God made a covenant with Adam and Eve in the Garden. The covenant was that if they were clean at the end of their earthly adventure, they could die, leave this world, regain their garments of light, and return to where God is. As an evidence of the validity of that covenant he gave them garments made of skins as a temporary replacement for their garments of light. The covenant was that they could

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return to him again. The substance (in this case, the assurance) was themselves—their own eternal redemption—and the evidence was the garments that would protect them throughout their odyssey here.

Always, on God's part, the evidence is in the power of the symbolism of the ordinances, the fullness of the blessings of the priesthood and of the Savior's Atonement. On our parts, the evidence is our own integrity—keeping his commandments with a determination to serve him to the end.

In the New Testament, when writers used the word *pistis* ("faith") to represent our covenants with God, the evidences they stated or implied on our part were: doing the ordinances, obeying, forgiving, repenting, sacrificing a broken heart and contrite spirit, loving God's children (the law of consecration is functional charity), taking upon oneself the name of Christ, and doing whatever the Spirit instructs one to do. In other words, the ultimate evidence of a person's fidelity is one's Self—the way one lives his life.

The Greek *pistos* is "faithful," and is a description of those who keep their covenants. Paul began his letter to the Ephesians by addressing it to "the faithful in Christ Jesus." Then for almost the entire first chapter he discusses the covenants we made at the Council in Heaven. Moroni reiterates those ideas as his farewell to us on the last page of the Book of Mormon. When we understand our relationship with the Savior and with his Father in terms of those premortal covenants, then we can comprehend the power of our own independence—that is, we have maximum free agency when we keep those covenants and realize that we have total freedom while under the umbrella of the Savior's Atonement. Then our lives truly do become the evidence of the validity of our covenants—an evidence of things hoped for. That is what the Prophet meant in Lecture Six when he described sacrifice, and that is what it means to have "faith in Christ," and to be "faithful in Christ Jesus."

The Prophet Joseph never uses the word *pistis* in the *Lectures on Faith*, but his discussion of faith covers the full range of the meaning of that word.⁹²⁸ At the beginning, he tells us that his definition of faith is going to grow. He wrote:

As we receive by faith all temporal blessings that we do receive, so we in like

⁹²⁸ The Book of Mormon is very consistent in that it almost always uses "faith" the same way that Peter, James, Paul and the other New Testament writers used *pistis*. However, the Doctrine and Covenants uses "faith" the same way Joseph Smith uses it in the *Lectures on Faith*. That is, with its full range of both ancient and modern meanings.

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manner receive by faith all spiritual blessings that we do receive. But faith is not only the principle of action, but of power also, in all intelligent beings, whether in heaven or on earth.⁹²⁹

In the final lecture, Lecture Seven, he leads us to the principle of the power he promised. The lecture begins:

In the preceding lessons we treated of what faith was, and of the object on which it rested. Agreeable to our plan, we now proceed to speak of its effects.⁹³⁰

Joseph invites our minds to go with him to the very beginning where

...no world has yet been framed that was not framed by faith, neither has there been an intelligent being on any of God's creations who did not get there by reason of faith as it existed in himself or in some other being....for it is by faith that the Deity works.⁹³¹

Joseph then gives us an expanded definition of faith. It is not contrary to, but it is different from, his first definition that faith is a principle of action:

Let us here offer some explanation in relation to faith, that our meaning may be clearly comprehended. We ask, then, what are we to understand by a man's working by faith? We answer—we understand that when a man works by faith he works by mental exertion instead of physical force. It is by words, instead of exerting his physical powers, with which every being works when he works by faith. God said, "Let there be light: and there was light."⁹³²

In Lecture Seven, the Prophet lifts us up to the pinnacle of the promises of the covenants:

⁹²⁹ Smith, *Lectures on Faith*, Lecture 2:13.

⁹³⁰ Smith, *Lectures on Faith*, Lecture 7:1.

⁹³¹ Smith, *Lectures on Faith*, Lecture 7:2.

⁹³² Smith, *Lectures on Faith*, Lecture 7:3.

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3. Faith as power. It is the mechanism by which humans exercise divine power. ...Ultimately faith is the power to be like God. ... The whole visible creation, as it now exists, is the effect of faith. It was faith by which it was framed, and it is by the power of faith that it continues in its organized form, and by which the planets move round their orbits and sparkle forth their glory. So, then, faith is truly the first principle in the science of theology, and, when understood, leads the mind back to the beginning, and carries it forward to the end; or, in other words, from eternity to eternity.⁹³³

By moving our minds back to the covenants we made in the beginning—to the Council in Heaven or earlier—Joseph shows us the most fundamental essence of what and who we are, then he projects that understanding into the eternal future:

As faith, then, is the principle by which the heavenly hosts perform their works, and by which they enjoy all their felicity, we might expect to find it set forth in a revelation from God as the principle upon which his creatures here below must act in order to obtain the felicities enjoyed by the saints in the eternal world.⁹³⁴

It is reasonable to believe that the assignments we received at the Council are consistent with our eternal personalities—the laws of our individual beings.

In summary: like virtually every other word in the scriptures, “faith” has a meaning that expresses the original intent of the author, but also, and no less important, is that “faith” has a meaning that the reader understands according to his or her own language and experience. In its simplest form it is what the Prophet Joseph said it is: “the principle of action in spiritual things as well as in temporal.”⁹³⁵ It is the sense of constancy and continuity that keeps us sane and teaches us to keep trying. As a principle of action, it is the motivation behind one’s willingness to flip a switch in a dark room, knowing that if he does an electric bulb to give light. It is that same simple yet profound faith of a child when she prays to her Heavenly Father because she knows he is listening.

⁹³³ Smith, *Lectures on Faith*, Lecture 7:5.

⁹³⁴ Smith, *Lectures on Faith*, Lecture 7:6.

⁹³⁵ Smith, *Lectures on Faith*, Lecture 1:12-13.

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At the other end of its spectrum, “faith” is as Joseph described it in the conclusions of *Lectures on Faith*. It is the power by which God created all things and it is the power that brings one to salvation. In that sense, the meaning of “faith” is so expansive that it comprehends the complete range of all of the principles, ordinances, and covenants of the gospel. That is apparently how Peter intended *pistis* to be understood when he wrote:

1 Simon Peter, a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ, to *them that have obtained* like precious faith [*pistis*] with us *through the righteousness*⁹³⁶ of God and our Savior Jesus Christ:

2 Grace and peace be multiplied unto you *through the knowledge* of God, and of Jesus our Lord,

3 *According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness*, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue:

4 *Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises*: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:1-4a, emphasis added).

That is also the meaning Mormon intended. The center of his sermon in Moroni 7, the focal point of its chiasmus, are the verses that focus on the same covenantal concept Peter described (1 Peter 1:2-4, 2 Peter 1:1-10). In the following, we have also emphasized the code words we discussed earlier in this book.

19 Wherefore, I beseech of you, brethren, that ye should search diligently in the light of Christ that ye may know good from evil; and if ye will *lay hold upon* every good thing, and condemn it not, ye certainly will be a *child of Christ*.

20 And now, my brethren, how is it possible that ye can *lay hold upon* every good thing? (Moroni 7:19-20)

When one “lays hold” of something, one uses his hand. By using the hand as an introduction to his observations about faith, Mormon has successfully turned the next few verses into a virtual commentary on the 21st Psalm. He wrote:

⁹³⁶ The word Peter uses is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *Zedek*. See Strong, Greek 1342 and 1343. It means just, meek, righteous.

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21 And now I come to that *faith*, of which I said I would speak; and I will tell you the *way* whereby ye may *lay hold* on every good thing.

22 For behold, God knowing all things, being from everlasting to everlasting, behold, he *sent angels* to minister unto the children of men, to make manifest concerning the *coming of Christ*; and *in Christ there should come every good thing*.

23 And God also declared unto prophets, *by his own mouth*, that *Christ should come*.

24 And behold, there were divers ways that he did manifest things unto the children of men, which were good; and all things which are good cometh of Christ; otherwise men were fallen, and there could no good thing come unto them.

25 Wherefore, *by the ministering of angels*, and *by every word* which proceeded forth *out of the mouth of God*, men began *to exercise faith in Christ*; and thus *by faith, they did lay hold upon every good thing*; and thus it was *until the coming of Christ*.

26 And *after that he came men also were saved by faith in his name*; and *by faith, they become the sons of God*. And as surely as Christ liveth he spake these words unto our fathers, saying: Whatsoever thing ye shall *ask the Father in my name*, which is good, *in faith* believing that ye shall receive, behold, it shall be done unto you (Moroni 7:21-26).

Having established his meaning, Mormon now turns to the practical importance of what he has just taught.

27 Wherefore, my beloved brethren, have miracles ceased because Christ hath ascended into heaven, and *hath sat down on the right hand of God*, to claim of the Father his rights of mercy which he hath upon the children of men?

28 For he hath answered the ends of the law, and he claimeth all those who have *faith* in him; and they who have *faith* in him will *cleave unto every good thing*; wherefore he advocateth the cause of the children of men; and he dwelleth eternally in the heavens.

29 And because he hath done this, my beloved brethren, have miracles ceased? Behold I say unto you, Nay; neither have angels ceased to minister unto the children of men.

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30 For behold, they are subject unto him, to minister according to the word of his command, *showing themselves unto them of strong faith and a firm mind in every form of godliness.*

31 And the office of their ministry is to call men unto repentance, and to fulfil and *to do the work of the covenants of the Father*, which he hath made unto the children of men, to prepare the way among the children of men, by declaring the word of Christ unto the chosen vessels of the Lord, that they may bear testimony of him.

32 And by so doing, the Lord God prepareth the *way* that the residue of men may have faith in Christ, that the *Holy Ghost may have place in their hearts*, according to the power thereof; and after this manner bringeth to pass the Father, *the covenants which he hath made unto the children of men* (Moroni 7:27-32).

It is reasonable to posit that what we have just read is Mormon's description of his own mission as well as that of some members of his audience. He next quotes the Saviour in first person.

33 And Christ hath said: *If ye will have faith in me ye shall have power to do whatsoever thing is expedient in me.*

34 And he hath said: Repent all ye ends of the earth, and *come unto me*, and be baptized in my name, and *have faith in me, that ye may be saved* (Moroni 7:33-34).

When one has faith in the Saviour, then Joseph Smith's change in Paul's definition of *pistis* becomes absolutely correct. When the "substance" of the covenant is one's own soul, then "assurance" of salvation is a much more accurate way of describing the object of the covenant and the intent of its fulfillment. Mormon now returns to the very practical meaning and responsibilities of faith

35 And now, my beloved brethren, if this be the case that these things are true which I have spoken unto you, and *God will show unto you*, with power and great glory at the last day, that they are true, and if they are true has the day of miracles ceased?

36 Or have angels ceased to appear unto the children of men? Or has he withheld the power of the Holy Ghost from them? Or will he, so long as time shall last, or the earth shall stand, or there shall be one man upon the face thereof to be saved?

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37 Behold I say unto you, Nay; for it is by faith that miracles are wrought; and it is by faith that angels appear and minister unto men; wherefore, if these things have ceased wo be unto the children of men, for it is because of unbelief, and all is vain.

38 For no man can be saved, according to the words of Christ, save they shall have *faith in his name*; wherefore, if these things have ceased, then has faith ceased also; and awful is the state of man, for they are as though there had been no *redemption* made.

39 But behold, my beloved brethren, I judge better things of you, for I judge that ye have *faith in Christ because of your meekness*; for if ye have not faith in him then ye are not fit to be numbered among the people of his church (Moroni 7:35-39).