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The Resurrection: An Embattled Keystone

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Keith J. Wilson

The doctrine of the Resurrection, traditionally the central belief of Christianity, finds little practical consensus among many Christians today. However, the Book of Mormon provides not only marvelous doctrinal clarity but also a powerful witness of the resurrection of Jesus and of all humankind.

A keystone of an arch is the central stone that structurally holds the other stones in place. If Christianity possesses a theological keystone, then many would designate it as the doctrine of the resurrection. This doctrine, which began on that original Easter morning, has developed into the most fundamental belief of professing Christians. Theologians such as Moltmann, Robinson, and Küng support this premise with bold statements such as: "Christianity stands or falls with the reality of the raising of Jesus from the dead by God."¹ "The resurrection of Jesus Christ represents the watershed of N[ew] T[estament] history and the central point of its faith."² "Christianity, inasmuch as it is the confession of Jesus of Nazareth as the living and powerfully effective Christ, begins at Easter. Without Easter there is no Gospel . . . no faith, no proclamation, no Church, no worship, no mission."³

As strong as these contemporary voices are, an even more credible Christian source speaks directly from the New Testament. In Paul's first epistle to the Saints at Corinth, he writes:

"And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain" (1 Cor. 15:14). These Christian theologians,

both ancient and modern, all attest to the central position of the Resurrection in Christian theology.

The fact that Paul would write so forcefully in defense of the Resurrection within the close chronology of the event itself portends a second relevant resurrection issue—namely, how did the early Christian community understand the concept of the Resurrection? Were there differences then in their understanding and, if so, to what extent? Have these early doctrinal divisions influenced modern Christian traditions? The answers to these questions will shed light on the uniformity of this foundational Christian principle.

While the event of the Resurrection provided the central theme for early Christianity, it by no means spawned a uniform interpretation. To the contrary, the occurrence generated a host of different meanings, almost as varied as the early Christians themselves. Even the New Testament writers Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each highlight diverse elements of this event. A review of the specific contributions of each Gospel writer about the Resurrection will assist us in conceptualizing the various interpretations.

Matthew, one of Jesus' original twelve disciples, records much detail about the Resurrection. He alone relates the incident of the guards at the sealed sepulcher (Matt. 27:62–66), the rolling back of the stone (28:2–3), the simultaneous resurrection of other Saints (27:52–53), and the chief priests' attempts to suppress the evidence of the empty tomb (28:11–15). In concert with the other writers, he cites the visit of Mary and the other women to the tomb (28:1) and their encounter with the risen Lord (28:9–10).

The second writer, Mark, parallels most closely the other three accounts. While he notes such particulars as Mary Magdalene's difficult past (Mark 16:9) and the missionary charge of the risen Lord (16:15–18), in general his record closely follows many of the consensual resurrection details such as timing, location, and participants.

Luke chronicles a number of significant details. He agrees with his counterparts in the salient facts of the first female visitors to the tomb and the subsequent experience of Peter. However, he presents a most divergent event in the account of two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35). This singular recording focuses at length on the physical nature of the resurrected Lord,

as does Luke's subsequent statement concerning Christ's flesh and bones (24:39).

John, the last of the four evangelists, gives Christians perhaps the largest contribution of original resurrection details. While he confirms most of the general events of that first Easter morning, he breaks new ground in areas such as Christ's encounter with Mary at the garden tomb (John 20:11-17), his pointed conversation with Thomas about disbelieving his physical nature (20:24-29), and the extensive report of his visit to his disciples by the sea of Tiberias (21:1-25). While the four Gospel writers were not the only New Testament witnesses concerning the Resurrection, they do chronicle the supporting events from a first-person perspective.

Ancient and Modern Views

The apostles and disciples of the New Testament period devoted much of their teaching and writing to the Resurrection (e.g., Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32). Even within their ministry they confronted distortions and outright rejections among the believers (2 Tim. 2:17-18; 1 Cor. 15:12). The believers' responses merely foreshadowed the divergent resurrection notions that blossomed during the post-New Testament period. Those reconstructions grew out of the philosophic intersections of Christianity with neo-Platonism, Gnosticism, and Docetism, all of which stamped deep impressions on this nascent faith. Neo-Platonism brought with it the Hellenistic idea that the body is undesirable and restrictive, whereas the soul is destined for immortal existence. Gnosticism emphasized secret knowledge as the key to a reunion with an immaterial God. Finally, Docetism taught that divine beings only appear to be human or physical, and Christ never came into real "contact with the world of matter."⁴ During the first four centuries, these philosophic movements combined with the emerging Christian faith. The result was a blending process that altered or at least influenced many of the fundamental Christian doctrines. Foremost among these impacted doctrines was that of the Resurrection.

The theological interpretations of the Resurrection bifurcated into divergent positions as these philosophies were assimilated into Christianity. A divisive issue became the nature of a resurrected body. The Hellenistic camp believed that the Resurrection

of Jesus was only a spiritual or noncorporeal occurrence. They cited both the disciples' failure to recognize the risen Lord and the words of the apostle Paul, which described the Resurrection as a "transformation" and a "spiritual body," to signify a noncorporeal or spiritual event. In contrast, the second position held that the Resurrection was a physical event, and Christ came forth from the tomb with a glorified, tangible body. The chasm between these two interpretations became a doctrinal battleground of the post-apostolic period.

Augustine wrote about the resurrection discord in the early church with this description, as noted by scholar Hugh Nibley: "Since it is the one doctrine that makes Christians Christians, it is alarming to learn from St. Augustine that in his day 'in nothing is there so much conflict and controversy among Christians (themselves) as on the subject of the resurrection of the flesh.' 'On no other matter,' he writes, 'do they disagree so vehemently, so obstinately, so resolutely, or so contentiously as on the subject of the resurrection of the flesh.'"⁵ Here Augustine summarized the ideological collisions of the first four centuries. Staunch supporters of a physical resurrection, such as Ignatius,⁶ Justin Martyr,⁷ and Tertullian,⁸ tried to withstand the wave of incorporealism. They rallied their churchmen with cries such as, "I *know* that Christ had a body after the resurrection"⁹ and "Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of . . . Platonic and dialectic composition!"¹⁰ In spite of this, they were increasingly arrayed against educated intellectuals. Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Augustine represented the core of these immaterialists who ardently promulgated a disembodied, spiritual, or soul-type resurrection. Following the victory of the intellectuals at the Council of Nicaea, the incorporeal view of the Resurrection firmly established itself in Christian theology and has maintained that position ever since.¹¹

In spite of these doctrinal squabbles, the concept of the Resurrection has managed to maintain a central theological position within modern Christianity. And yet, in recent years this doctrinal centerpiece has been subjected to increased scrutiny. Contemporary scholars such as Gerd Lüdemann¹² and John Crossan¹³ have blatantly challenged the historicity of the Resurrection. Physicist Frank Tipler avers that "most modern Christian theologians" no longer believe in the reality of the Resurrection.¹⁴ These recent

challenges solicit a pair of questions: Do modern, practicing Christians profess an active belief in the Resurrection? And if so, what do they understand the doctrine of the Resurrection to be?

National polling services such as Gallup, Harris, and Barna have closely monitored America's religious pulse. Recently, Gallup researchers have established that 94 percent of all Americans believe in God. Also, the related issue of belief in Jesus Christ's divinity has found 84 percent of Americans in agreement.¹⁵ On the surface these numbers portray a decisive Christian majority that accepts the fundamental doctrines. However, a more careful analysis projects a people who accept the fundamentals but struggle to define the specifics. The doctrine of the Resurrection is a case in point.

Kenneth Woodward addressed the specifics of the Resurrection with a feature article in *Newsweek* entitled "Rethinking the Resurrection." His piece argues that even though "most Christians still believe in the risen Jesus, . . . very few Christians are literalists on this point and . . . there is a range of opinion on what the Resurrection means."¹⁶

His article was not the first to identify the public confusion about this central doctrine. In 1988 the Gallup organization probed this same issue of resurrection by asking 750 adults whether or not people will have "human form" in the life after death. Slightly less than half of the respondents (43 percent) said "yes," while the remaining 57 percent either disagreed or didn't know.¹⁷ Yet another survey by the National Opinion Research Center in 1984 phrased a resurrection-related query with the words, "Will life after death be a spiritual life involving our mind but not our body?" The respondents leaned noticeably to an immaterial resurrection; 75 percent replied that this was either "somewhat" or "very likely" to be the case.¹⁸

What these surveys seem to indicate is that public opinion varies widely over the specifics of the Resurrection. The first survey suggests that almost half of all Christians believe that the resurrected state will include a physical form or body. Yet the second survey swings back to a 75 percent tally for a nonphysical resurrection. Perhaps the best summary of these findings is that no consensus exists beyond the notion of a generic or generalized resurrection. To become more precise suggests that either the populace splits evenly over the physical/spiritual resurrection

debate or that Americans favor a spiritual view of resurrection. Regardless of where the fulcrum pivots, the specifics of this Christian theological centerpiece, the Resurrection, are anything but clear in our current context. In retrospect, this development is somewhat ironic. What began as perhaps the very theological keystone of Christianity itself has become, in recent times, truly an embattled doctrine.

The Book of Mormon and the Doctrine of the Resurrection

In modern times a marvelous work has commenced. The Lord has revealed through the Prophet Joseph Smith an additional witness of Jesus Christ, namely, the Book of Mormon. This volume of scripture supports the Bible. In recent years, a prophet has elaborated on the interplay and relationship between the Bible and the Book of Mormon. President Ezra Taft Benson stated: "The Book of Mormon, the record of Joseph, verifies and clarifies the Bible. It removes stumbling blocks, it restores many plain and precious things. We testify that when used together, the Bible and the Book of Mormon confound false doctrines, lay down contentions, and establish peace."¹⁹ These words confirm what Book of Mormon writers anciently foretold concerning the tandem relationship between the Book of Mormon and the Bible. In 1 Ne. 13:40 we read: "These last records, which thou hast seen among the Gentiles, shall establish the truth of the first, which are of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, and shall make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away from them." An express purpose of this revealed text is to establish the truth or truths of the Bible. Certainly the Christian doctrine of the Resurrection qualifies as a plain and precious truth in need of clarity.

The Book of Mormon proclaims the reality of the Resurrection through two contrasting approaches. First, numerous prophets record within their inspired writings doctrinal descriptions of the nature of the Resurrection. They speak in unmistakable terms about who will be resurrected, when resurrection will occur, and what it will entail. In particular, many of those ancient seers write with keen insight into the confusion that would engulf believing Christians centuries later. Their frontal approach to the physical,

literal nature of the Resurrection speaks volumes to our current controversies.

The second level of Book of Mormon support for a corporeal resurrection shifts to the powerful realm of experience. This book of scripture records the epiphany of the risen Lord and a short but detailed account of his ministry with a branch of Israelites (see 3 Nephi 11–26). Giving a scriptural description of the Resurrection, it leaves the deductive doctrinal explanations and portrays the actual experience with the physical resurrected Jesus.

The Book of Mormon includes fifteen different books of prophetic writings. Often, multiple prophets contribute within a specific book. While almost every prophet mentions either the doctrine of the Resurrection or the resurrected Lord, some give much greater attention than others to this doctrine. Among those who devote considerable space to the Resurrection are Jacob, Abinadi, Amulek, and Alma.²⁰

Jacob is one of the earlier prophets in the Book of Mormon sequence (ca. 550 B.C.). He delivers to his people a mighty sermon on the Atonement of Jesus Christ and places the Resurrection at the core of his remarks. Beginning with verse 4 and continuing through verse 26 of 2 Nephi chapter 9, Jacob teaches about the Resurrection. He mentions specifically the following ten points:

1. All flesh must die; nevertheless, we will all stand before God with physical bodies (9:4).

2. Jesus Christ will live in the flesh upon the earth. He will die and perform the infinite Atonement, which includes the power of resurrection and enables all to overcome the impact of the first judgment, which mandated death (9:5–7).

3. Without the power to be resurrected and overcome physical death, all humankind would have been miserable forever and in eternal bondage to Lucifer (9:8–9).

4. The goodness of God is manifest through Christ overcoming physical death (9:10).

5. Christ delivers us from the physical grave as well as the spiritual grave. Through his power, the spirits and bodies of individuals are restored, reunited, and become immortal as well as incorruptible (9:11–13).

6. Resurrected beings will have a perfect knowledge of either their guilt or their righteousness (9:14).

7. All beings after resurrection will stand before God and will retain their same state of righteousness or wickedness (9:15–16).

8. The joys of the resurrected righteous will be “full forever” (9:18).

9. The Lord suffered the pains of all the family of Adam so that each person will be able to be resurrected (9:21–22).

10. The Atonement (which circumscribes the Resurrection) will assure that even those who died in ignorance will be delivered from physical death (9:26).

The Prophet Jacob certainly explicated the doctrine of resurrection in succinct terms. His teachings alone build a strong case for the doctrinal significance of the Resurrection in the Book of Mormon.

A second strong witness for the doctrine of the Resurrection surfaces in the teachings of Abinadi (ca. 150 B.C.). As he rebuked the apostate King Noah, he emphasized the following:

1. All prophets had essentially taught that the Messiah would have a physical body, suffer afflictions, and accomplish the resurrection of the dead (Mosiah 13:33–35).

2. The Son has power over the dead, he breaks the bands of death, and he effectuates the Resurrection (15:8–9, 20).

3. There will be a First Resurrection for those who have been righteous or have died without the law, such as children. The willfully rebellious will not have part in the First Resurrection (15:21–26).

4. Without Christ and his ability to overcome death, the Resurrection would have been impossible. He has removed the “sting of death” (16:6–8).

5. The Resurrection will place individuals into an eternal state of either happiness or misery, depending upon their choices (16:10–12).

Like Jacob, Abinadi makes frequent references to the doctrine of the Resurrection. He is the first Book of Mormon prophet to teach us of the multiple phases of the Resurrection, with his references to a “first” resurrection. Also, he adds his voice to those of the previous prophets who all testified of a resurrection of the dead.

Yet another witness within this scriptural text is Amulek (ca. 80 B.C.). He speaks to his people with doctrinal candor that leaves little room for ambiguity. Even though his remarks surface in a single chapter, Alma 11, he is still able to proclaim the following truths:

1. All will overcome temporal death through the death of Christ (11:41–42).

2. The Resurrection will combine the spirit and the body again in a perfect form. We will appear as we do right now (mortally) with physical body parts (11:43).

3. Our memories will also be made perfect (11:43).

4. The physical process of the Resurrection will cover even minute details (11:44).

5. The Resurrection is inextricably linked with the Judgment (11:44).

6. A resurrected being will have body and spirit inseparably unified (11:45).

While Amulek did not cover a wide band of subjects in his teachings, he did give considerable emphasis to a select few, which included some pronouncements about the nature of the Resurrection.

Perhaps the greatest resurrection theologian in the Book of Mormon is the prophet Alma (ca. 70 B.C.). In an extensive discourse covering three scriptural chapters, Alma 40–42, he teaches his rebellious son Corianton about the doctrine of the Resurrection. What he mentions is not new material in general for the Book of Mormon text. However, his concentrated sermon, his directness, and his precision set Alma apart from his prophetic colleagues. Most of Alma’s Resurrection doctrine emerges early in

his discourse in Alma 40. Specifically, he emphasizes these points of doctrine:

1. The general resurrection will commence after the resurrection of Christ and will give priority to those who lived before Christ (40:16–19).
2. The term “first resurrection” includes those who preceded Christ – from Adam until the Savior’s resurrection (40:16, 18).
3. There is a time period between mortal death and the Resurrection. This will be a spiritual existence and will bifurcate into a realm of the righteous in “paradise” and the wicked in darkness (40:11–15, 21).
4. The soul (spirit) will be reunited or restored to the body in the Resurrection (40:18–23).
5. Every limb, joint, or body part will be restored to its “perfect” or “proper” frame in the Resurrection (40:23; 41:2).

Not only does Alma raise these resurrection issues, but he also boldly reiterates some of them again and again. The corporeality of the Resurrection is such a case in point. In a span of just six verses, Alma refers to the “reuniting” or “restoring” of the “soul to the body” five times (Alma 40:18–23). This is all the more remarkable considering the divisiveness of the doctrine of a physical resurrection in our modern Christian context. Alma does not stop there, however. He states that all physical body parts will be restored in a perfect way to the resurrected being (40:23). A final tribute to Alma’s passages comes in the form of a profound theological concept. This prophet reveals the idea of an interim spiritual existence between death and the Resurrection. While this may not be resurrection theology per se, it nevertheless helps us considerably to understand the context in which the Resurrection will occur. On the basis of these principles and concepts, Alma certainly deserves to be categorized as the preeminent prophet of the Resurrection doctrine.

In summary, the Book of Mormon emerges as a deep reservoir of resurrection doctrine. Four prophets in particular promulgate the doctrine of the Resurrection. They teach us that Jesus Christ is the power behind the universal resurrection, that the

resurrected state is the key to happiness, that without the Resurrection humankind would be miserable forever, that there will be various phases within the Resurrection, that in the Resurrection the body and the spirit will be inseparably reunited, and that all bodily elements will be restored to their perfect condition. To say that the Book of Mormon is a treasure trove of Resurrection doctrine is an understatement.

The Resurrected Christ

Even with its doctrinal significance, the Book of Mormon offers yet another invaluable view of the Resurrection discussion. This volume of scripture includes an extended account of the resurrected Lord and his visit with an unknown branch of the house of Israel. In the record of 3 Nephi, the Savior appears initially to 2,500 people (3 Ne. 17:25) and ministers to them and then others for a number of days. Thus the Book of Mormon not only addresses the doctrinal issues of the Resurrection, but it also includes an extended experience with the physically glorified, resurrected Lord.

In the book 3 Nephi, commencing with chapter 11 and concluding with chapter 28, this sacred text chronicles the Nephite ministry of the resurrected Christ. Chapter 11 begins the account and focuses directly on the physical nature of the Resurrection. Shortly after the Lord appears to the righteous multitude, he invites each individual to come forth:

Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world. And it came to pass that the multitude went forth, and thrust their hands into his side, and did feel the prints of the nails in his hands and in his feet; and this they did do, going forth one by one until they had all gone forth, and did see with their eyes and did feel with their hands, and did know of a surety and did bear record, that it was he, of whom it was written by the prophets, that should come (3 Ne. 11:14-15).

This scriptural incident leaves little room for doubt about the physicality of the resurrected Lord. He not only shows them the marks of the Crucifixion, but he also invites them to touch him

and verify individually that he is physically the resurrected Jesus. The account indicates that 2,500 individuals participated. But this is only the initial exchange in a series of physical encounters.

Later as the Savior prepared to leave, he changed his plans and administered to the sick and afflicted. Then, in a poignant scene, he called for the children of the multitude and physically blessed them one at a time, whereupon the heavens were opened to the entire assemblage (17:21–25). Following this outpouring, he instituted the ordinance of sacramental emblems. He conspicuously took up bread, blessed and broke it, and then gave it to his disciples to eat (18:3; 20:3). Prior to his final departure, the text records the Lord “touching” his disciples to give them the “power to give the Holy Ghost” (18:36–37), and then “touching” the nine disciples who desired to be with the Lord in his heavenly kingdom (28:12). The text of the Book of Mormon, particularly the account in 3 Nephi of the risen Jesus, gives us a very lucid account of a physical, glorified, resurrected being. The account is a strong and ideal complement to a volume that is loaded with definitive doctrinal support for the Resurrection.

The book of 3 Nephi also contributes one other witness to the reality of the Resurrection. After the Savior showed himself physically to the multitude, he conversed directly with their leaders, asking them about their diligence in keeping a written record of their experiences (3 Ne. 23:7–10). As part of his inquiry, he specifically probed whether or not they had recorded the resurrection of many of the Nephite Saints subsequent to his own resurrection (23:11). This miraculous event had fulfilled a prophecy of the earlier prophet Samuel. When they admitted their oversight, he asked them to amend their records (23:12–13). This event lends further credibility to the reality of the physical resurrection. Although it is secondary compared to the marvelous manifestation of the risen Lord, it is nevertheless another witness to the reality of a universal resurrection.

Conclusion

In retrospect, the doctrine of the Resurrection of Jesus has become the focal point of all Christianity. Without it, as President Howard W. Hunter stated, “The gospel of Jesus Christ becomes a litany of wise sayings and seemingly unexplainable miracles.”²¹

This premise of the centrality of the Resurrection finds support across a broad spectrum of Christian denominations and respected theologians. However, the doctrinal specifics of the Resurrection do not enjoy the same kind of unanimity. This has been the case from the original Easter morning, when even Jesus' closest followers disbelieved until shown otherwise, to the Saints at Corinth whom Paul sought to persuade, to the immaterialists with whom the early church father Tertullian battled, and to the current Christian audience. Indeed, a surge of resurrection skepticism seems to be currently cresting with such reassessments as "Rethinking the Resurrection."

Amidst all this controversy in Christianity, a new volume of scripture has emerged with unmistakable clarity concerning the Resurrection. First, the Book of Mormon discusses the doctrine of the Resurrection with both depth and breadth. Several prophets choose this doctrine as one of their central scriptural topics. Their sermons directly address corporeality, as a testament to their inspired vision. Then, as a perfect complement to the doctrinal discussion, the Book of Mormon portrays perhaps the ultimate resurrection treatise: an eye-witness account of the risen glorified Lord. It is no wonder that a latter-day prophet, President Ezra Taft Benson, would characterize the Book of Mormon as the "keystone of the doctrine of the Resurrection."²²

This poses a rather intriguing relationship between the Book of Mormon and Christianity in a current context. If Christianity indeed builds itself upon the doctrine of the Resurrection, and if that keystone represents an ambiguous doctrinal block at best, then surely the Book of Mormon beckons to all Christianity to come and learn of the reality of this glorious doctrine.

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Notes

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2. J. A. T. Robinson, "Resurrection in the NT," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. G. A. Buttrick, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962-76), 4:43.
3. Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, trans. Edward Quinn (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), 381.
4. S. Kent Brown, "Whither the Early Church?" *Ensign*, October 1988, 10.
5. Hugh Nibley, *The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 144-45.
6. *Ibid.*, 143.
7. Justin Martyr, *Fragments of the Lost Work of Justin on the Resurrection*, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:294-99.
8. David L. Paulsen, "The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment," *BYU Studies* 35, no. 4 (1995-96): 62-73.
9. Nibley, *The World and the Prophets*, 143.
10. Tertullian, *On Prescription against Heretics* 7, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:246.
11. Paulsen, "Divine Embodiment," 52-79.
12. Gerd Lüdemann, *What Really Happened to Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 134.
13. John Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995).
14. Frank J. Tipler, *The Physics of Immortality: Modern Cosmology, God and the Resurrection of the Dead* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1994), 310.
15. George Gallup Jr. and Sarah Jones, *100 Questions and Answers: Religion in America* (Princeton: Hermitage, 1989), 2.
16. Kenneth L. Woodward, "Rethinking the Resurrection," *Newsweek*, 8 April 1996, 62.
17. Roper Archival Center for Public Opinion, University of Connecticut; Academic Universe, Polls and Surveys.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Ezra Taft Benson, *Conference Report*, October 1984, 7.

20. Robert J. Matthews, "The Doctrine of the Resurrection as Taught in the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 30, no. 3 (summer 1990): 41-56. The discussion that follows summarizes Matthews's findings.
21. Howard W. Hunter, *Conference Report*, April 1986, 18.
22. Benson, *Conference Report*, October 1986, 4.