

# The Bruce R. McConkie Story

[By Joseph Fielding McConkie](#)

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Meridian Magazine is running two excerpts from Joseph Fielding McConkie's new biography of his father, *The Bruce R. McConkie Story, Reflections of a Son*, published by Deseret Book.. We asked him to preface the first excerpt with a few reflections on why he wrote the book and what he learned in the process. This is his response, followed by an excerpt that takes us behind the scenes in the writing of the well-known book, [Mormon Doctrine](#) which has probably been the most-quoted and remembered reference book ever published in the Church..

I have been asked what my motivation was in my writing [The Bruce R. McConkie Story: Reflections of a Son](#).

The answer rests as much in things I do not understand as it does in things that I do.

It has been almost 20 years since Sheri Dew of Deseret Book invited me to write such a book. The feeling that I should do so simply was not there at that time. Perhaps this was a matter of my not being ready. I do not know.

It was about three years ago that the feeling came that I should see what I could do with the topic though the idea intimidated me. The project presented a number of special challenges. I note two, first, the story was too good to tell. That is it was simply too personal or sacred in some instances to make public.

Secondly, the story was too bad to tell. That is because Bruce McConkie chose to stand for something he had a lot of critics even within the Church. Their actions were often sufficiently petty that they did not deserve a place in print. They simply did not engender faith and I knew that my father would want no part in telling such stories.

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Bruce and Amelia McConkie.

Suffice it to say there were a number of other difficulties peculiar to this work. My concern manifested itself last September when it was discovered that I had a tumor in my colon the description of which was a perfect match to the one that my father had. I asked my doctor what I could have done differently. He said, nothing, this is a case where heredity trumps.

One of the surgeons involved in the operation told me that while I was under the influence of the anesthetic I repeatedly pled for "help with the manuscript!" The other surgeon assured me that a miracle took place that day and that I was not alone in the operating room.

It was immediately after that experience that the obstacles in my path were removed and we were able to move forward with publication. During this period I had the opportunity to learn some of the great lessons that my father had learned as it became my turn to battle cancer.

You do not search and learn about a man like Bruce McConkie and have the kind of experiences

that I had and not learn something.

I am asked what the most meaningful things I learned about my father were. I am not sure I know the answer to that question. One of the important things I learned was that when you get into a story like this the story gets into you and you will never be the same.

I knew how concerned my father was over the welfare of each of his children, I had not known the sense of reverence he had for his forebears.

I knew of the profound respect he had for those who presided over him, what I had not known was the sense of respect he had for those who labored under his direction. I will note, however, that it was much easier to labor under his direction as a priesthood leader than it was to work under his direction in the yard.

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Bruce McConkie with a guide in China, May 1983

With his children, one of Dad's favorite sayings (which came from his mother) was "live above it." When something happened that in your judgment was unfair, living "above it" hardly seemed like the best solution. When as an adult I learned how frequently he was called on to practice what he preached, I began to see a lot of things quite differently.

After writing the chapter "The Mormon Doctrine Saga", I understand what he was teaching me when one day while I was sitting in his office out of the clear blue he said, "When the time comes that you are called in and rebuked for something that you did that was right and proper, you stand and take it, you offer no excuses just take it."

Interestingly, I had a number of such experiences when I served as an LDS chaplain in the military. His counsel proved to be wise.

I have also come to learn that, privately, some people are not what they appear in public. In a way that is true of my father. People thought him a good man. In truth he was much better than they supposed. I never learned a thing about him that did not make him stand a little taller. The same was true of my mother. They were the kind of people that real people liked.

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## Book Excerpt

*An excerpt from The Bruce R. McConkie Story: Reflections of a Son, published by Deseret Book.*

Chapter 11

### The Mormon Doctrine Saga 1958 and 1966

I've never seen a man in the Church in my experience that took our criticism-and it was more than criticism-but he took it better than anyone I ever saw.

-Henry D. Moyle

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Elders Milton R. Hunter, A. Theodore Tuttle, Paul H. Dunn, S. Dilworth Young, Hartman Rector Jr., Bruce R. McConkie and Loren C. Dunn (Elder Rector is the only one of this group yet living on this earth).

The book *Mormon Doctrine*, written by Bruce R. McConkie, is one of the time-honored classics of Mormon literature. Few books can match it in endurance or number of copies sold. Perhaps few books, except the scriptures, can match it in the frequency with which it has been quoted in talks and lessons by those seeking to teach gospel principles. And perhaps no book save the scriptures themselves has been surrounded by more myth and lore. In recounting the Mormon Doctrine saga, I have confined myself to matters upon which I am competent to speak and have used a question-and-answer format because that seems the most natural way to respond to the kinds of questions I have been asked most frequently.

**Question:** What was all the flap and fuss about Mormon Doctrine, anyway?

**Response:** The first edition of *Mormon Doctrine*, released in 1958, caused something of a stir by directly identifying Roman Catholicism as the "great and abominable church" spoken of by Nephi in the Book of Mormon. The authoritative tone of the book was also a concern, with the question being asked, "What right does Bruce McConkie have to speak for the Church?" The book came in for some criticism because of the strong language in which it denounced marginal practices among Latter-day Saints, such as card games in which face cards were used and family reunions that were held on the Sabbath.

**Question:** Is it true that President David O. McKay banned the book?

**Response:** In January 1960, President McKay asked Elder McConkie not to have the book reprinted.

**Question:** How is it, then, that the book was reissued?

**Response:** On July 5, 1966, President McKay invited Elder McConkie into his office and gave approval for the book to be reprinted if appropriate changes were made and approved. Elder Spencer W. Kimball was assigned to be Elder McConkie's mentor in making those changes.

**Question:** Is this generally known?

**Response:** I don't think so. I don't know how people would be expected to know this.

**Question:** Haven't you heard people say that Bruce McConkie had the book reprinted contrary to the direction of the First Presidency?

**Response:** Yes, but if they would think about it, that assertion does not make much sense. The publisher was Bookcraft, not Bruce McConkie, and Bookcraft was always very careful to follow the direction of the Brethren. It could also be noted that *Mormon Doctrine* was reissued in 1966, and its author was called to the Quorum of the Twelve in 1972. It takes a pretty good imagination to suppose that a man who flagrantly ignored the direction of the president of the Church and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles would be called to fill a vacancy in that body.

Whatever faults one might want to attribute to Bruce McConkie, no one who knew him could question his integrity or his discipline, particularly where matters of priesthood direction were concerned. Never in my life have I known a man who was more disciplined or obedient to priesthood direction. Bruce McConkie would have died a thousand deaths before he would have disregarded the prophet's counsel or that of the Quorum of the Twelve. He was a man who, when assigned to speak in general conference for fourteen minutes and thirty seconds, would not have thought to speak fourteen minutes and thirty-one seconds. He took a stopwatch with him to conference and timed himself by it. For that matter, he made it a practice to watch carefully what

other speakers did. When individuals went to him with concerns that fell outside the bounds of the authority or responsibility explicitly given to him, he simply refused to hear what was being said.

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A note written on a scrap of paper.

He followed counsel and minded his business. I have never met, nor do I expect to meet, a man more disciplined to the order of the priesthood. To suppose that he would reject the counsel of the president of the Church or the Quorum of the Twelve is to completely misrepresent the man and the truth.

**Question:** How do you know President McKay directed your father to reprint Mormon Doctrine?

**Response:** My father told me that President McKay had so directed him. In addition to that, I am in possession of handwritten papers by my father affirming that direction.

**Question:** Did the first edition of Mormon Doctrine cause embarrassment to President McKay?

**Response:** Yes. The Catholic bishop in Salt Lake City, Bishop Hunt, communicated to President McKay his displeasure with the book and what it said about the Catholic church.

**Question:** What was Elder McConkie's reaction to that criticism?

**Response:** He agreed that what he had written did not facilitate good relations with our Catholic neighbors. He stated, "It wasn't smart on my part." He had no reluctance in making the changes he made in the second edition of the book.

**Question:** So, at least originally, the First Presidency had concerns about Mormon Doctrine?

**Response:** Yes. One of those concerns was the title itself. There was some question about what business a Seventy had declaring the doctrine of the Church. It is interesting to note, however, that no suggestion was ever made that the title of the book be changed.

**Question:** Would it be fair to say that the First Presidency gave your father a good horsewhipping for some of the things he wrote in Mormon Doctrine?

**Response:** I think their concern was not as much with what he had written as that he had done it without seeking counsel and direction from those who presided over him. This was back in a day before the Brethren did much writing, and there was no established review system for what they did write. As to their giving him "a good horse whipping," I think we can be confident that they were not shy in voicing their feelings. I have been told that when he met with the First Presidency, my father was invited to be seated but chose to remain standing. I also know that it was his practice (because he told me I was to do the same) when you are getting scolded, you offer no excuses-you just take it. After the experience President Moyle observed, "I've never seen a man in the Church in my experience that took our criticism-and it was more than criticism-but he took it better than anyone I ever saw. When we were through and Bruce left us, I had a great feeling of love and appreciation for a man who could take it without any alibis, without any excuses, and said he appreciated what we said to him."

**Question:** So what kinds of things were omitted from the second edition of the book?

**Response:** In a number of instances, the first edition of Mormon Doctrine reached beyond the

stated purpose of the book-the declaration of the doctrines of Mormonism-to include denouncing various Christian heresies. Entries included the veneration of Mary, or Mariolatry, penance, transubstantiation (the notion that in the sacrament the wafer and wine become the actual flesh and blood of Christ), indulgences, and supererogation, which is the teaching that some people perform more good works than are necessary for their salvation and thus their surplus can be sold to the wicked. This teaching provided the basis for indulgences. Because the purpose of the book was to identify Mormon doctrine, not to catalog heresies, in writing about these things, Bruce McConkie had strayed from his purpose. Hence, such subjects were dropped in the second edition.

**Question:** Would it be accurate to say that the kinds of changes made between the first and second editions of Mormon Doctrine were primarily a matter of tone? If so, would it be fair to say that the editor of the original book was asleep at the switch?

**Response:** The changes between the two editions center on the softening of the tone in which things were said and the selection of things that were commented on. A responsible editor would have caught these things and insisted that they be changed. Much of the flap and fuss about Mormon Doctrine could thereby have been avoided.

**Question:** So who was the editor?

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Portrait of Elder Bruce R. McConkie.

**Response:** There wasn't one. Bookcraft was a young company in the process of establishing itself and growing up into the fine, professional publisher of Latter-day Saint books that it eventually became. George Bickerstaff, their first full-time editor, began working for Bookcraft in 1968, two years after the release of the second edition of Mormon Doctrine.

**Question:** So if George Bickerstaff, or someone with his Church sense, had been the editor at the time Bruce McConkie took the manuscript of Mormon Doctrine into Bookcraft, the first edition would probably have appeared essentially as the second edition did?

**Response:** Yes. That is one of the important roles a good editor will play. Getting a call from your editor can be like going to the dentist. It often means that something has to be pulled or filled or, at best, polished.

**Question:** How extensive was Elder Kimball's list of things that needed changing?

**Response:** There were about fifty items that Elder Kimball wanted Elder McConkie to revisit.

**Question:** Were these doctrinal matters in which he differed with Elder McConkie?

**Response:** No. They dealt with tone and with the wisdom of including particular things.

**Question:** How did Elder McConkie feel about the suggestions made by Elder Kimball?

**Response:** He was very appreciative. Elder Kimball was a wise mentor who taught him the difference between being right and being appropriate. The fact that something is true does not necessarily mean one ought to say it.

**Question:** Elder Kimball's list of things that needed changing sounds much less extensive than



the changes that were made in the second edition. Does this suggest that a wiser Bruce McConkie did a lot of rewriting on his own?

**Response:** Yes, it does.

**Question:** It has been suggested that the treatment of the Catholic church may not have been the primary source of the criticism directed at Mormon Doctrine but, rather, that the standard Elder McConkie held out for the members of the Church caused some to squirm. Is that the case?

**Response:** I think so. It is hard to imagine that a lot of Catholics in Salt Lake City were buying a book entitled Mormon Doctrine and then taking offense at it. The Protestants had been saying worse things about them for four hundred years, and it was, for the Catholics, like water off a duck's back.

At the same time, marginal practices among members of the Church were addressed strongly by Elder McConkie in the first edition of Mormon Doctrine. For instance, birth control was described as "gross wickedness" and "rebellion against God." Card playing was called "apostasy and rebellion." Light speeches in church meetings were described as "highly offensive" to the Spirit. Elder McConkie was not very adept at tolerating the gray area between right and wrong. Even today, my experience suggests that his unequivocal stand on organic evolution is the primary reason the book has been criticized. Critics frequently attempt to give credence to their objection by finding fault with the author or the book on any count they can.

**Question:** What did he say about evolution in the first edition that he was directed to change in the second edition?

**Response:** Changes between the two editions involve only a couple of sentences. The discussion on evolution is the longest single entry in the book, and it includes a lengthy quotation by President John Taylor against Darwin and his theory of evolution. In the first edition, this quotation was introduced with the statement that President Taylor's views reflected "the official doctrine of the Church." In the second edition, that statement was dropped. Elder McConkie wrote, "How scrubby and groveling [changed in the second edition to 'weak and puerile'] the intellectuality which, knowing that the Lord's plan takes all forms of life from a pre-existent spirit state, through mortality, and on to an ultimate resurrected state of immortality, yet finds comfort in the theoretical postulates that mortal life began in the scum of the sea, as it were, and has through eons of time evolved to its present varieties and state! Do those with spiritual insight really think that the infinite Creator of worlds without number would operate in this way?" The conclusion to this section in both editions is "There is no harmony between the truths of revealed religion and the theories of organic evolution."

**Question:** Elder McConkie was never without his critics, both in and out of the Church. To what extent do you see that criticism growing out of his uncompromising stand on evolution?

**Response:** It is, in my judgment, directly related. Secular writer Philip E. Johnson, in a work entitled Reason in the Balance, captures what is involved here: "In all the world there is no greater dogmatist than 'everybody knows.' Dogmatism is a human characteristic that grows out of insecurity. It is particularly pronounced in the case of individuals or groups that hold power positions which are threatened by criticism. Religious priesthoods have sometimes tried to protect their power by forbidding the translation of the Bible into vernacular languages or by taking a know-nothing attitude toward scientific observations that threatened traditional ways of viewing the world. In our own day the ruling priesthood consists of authoritative bodies like the National Academy of Sciences, the academic and legal elites, and the managers of the national media.

"The new priesthood, like the old ones, has a vested interest in safeguarding its cultural authority by making it as difficult as possible for critics to be heard. The modern equivalent of excommunication is marginalization, which is much more humane than physical punishment but just as effective in protecting the ruling philosophy. Those who try to challenge naturalism are confined not in a prison cell but in a stereotype, and the terms in which the media and the textbooks report any controversy are defined in a manner designed to prevent dangerous ideas from getting serious consideration. Whatever the critics of naturalism say is mere 'religious belief,' in opposition to 'scientific knowledge'; hence it is, by definition, fantasy as opposed to solid fact."<sup>1</sup>

In short, Elder McConkie's very certainty on this issue raised the ire of disciples of the theories of organic evolution within the Church. The controversy surrounding Mormon Doctrine thus provided a forum that some of them have used to marginalize one of their most outspoken critics.

**Question:** In the course of his ministry, did Bruce McConkie change his opinion on any doctrinal matters?

**Response:** Certainly. I recently received a telephone call from a young returned missionary who was frustrated about a doctrinal conversation he was having with some friends. He indicated that he had quoted Elder McConkie in support of his position, and his friends rejected what Elder McConkie had said on the grounds that he had changed his opinion on other things he had written. How, they argued, could you trust him if he changed his mind?

I told him that any man who could serve as a general authority for forty years and not improve his views on a few doctrines as a result of that experience was not to be trusted. It seems to me that Elder McConkie's credibility is strengthened by the fact that he was always anxious to grow in understanding and refine his views. In fact, as part of the preface to his *Mortal Messiah* series, he said: "As to its value, I say only that it is what it is, and it will stand or fall on its own merit; nor do I think what is here recorded is the beginning and the end. It too is but an opening door. Others who follow will find the errors and deficiencies that always and ever attend every mortal work, will correct them, and, building upon whatever foundations then exist, will write greater and better works on the same subject."<sup>2</sup> This expression reflects the attitude of a lifetime. He never had any difficulty with the idea that he was wrong on something, and he was always anxious to change when he discovered that to be the case.

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Perhaps the last picture taken of Bruce and Amelia McConkie. March 1985.

**Question:** Do you know how your grandfather Joseph Fielding Smith felt about the book?

**Response:** He thought so highly of it that he kept his copy at home. He was afraid that if he took it to the office, someone might walk off with it or borrow it and forget to return it.

**Question:** Did Bookcraft receive complaints about the book?

**Response:** I asked that question of Marvin Wallin, who was managing director of Bookcraft when *Mormon Doctrine* was published. He said they never received a single complaint.

**Question:** What doctrinal errors were corrected between the first and second editions of the book?

**Response:** I do not know of a single instance in which Elder McConkie was asked to change or chose to change his doctrinal position. The second edition of *Mormon Doctrine* is a substantially better book. The tone of the book is softer, articles attacking false doctrines born of apostasy but

not directly germane to Mormonism have been dropped, and eighty pages of new material have been added. No doctrinal changes were made, however. The essence of each entry remains the same.

The report submitted to the First Presidency by Elder Spencer W. Kimball indicates that he checked changes made on fifty-six pages, all of which he approved. He did not indicate a single instance of doctrinal disagreement with what was written. Again, I know of no single instance in which the doctrine announced in the first edition differed from that of the second edition. Much was changed by way of tone: Things were simply said more appropriately, but the same things were said.

**Question:** Are there entries in Mormon Doctrine that are particularly revealing about its author?

**Response:** Yes. One of the most revealing expressions in the book is found under the heading "Sermons." In the first edition, we read: "To read a written sermon, except under very unusual circumstances, is a mockery of sacred things. There may be a few instances in which sermons may be read, just as there are a few formal occasions when prayers may be read, as for instance at the dedication of temples. On some radio and television broadcasts written sermons may be appropriate, and there is no impropriety in little children reading written talks. But in the absence of some compelling reason for making an exception to what the Lord has commanded, a written sermon does no more than bear record that the preacher has neither the knowledge to draw on, the faith to rely on the Spirit, nor the ability to attune himself to the spirit of inspiration."

The standard suggested here reaches well beyond the maturity level of many Latter-day Saints. The expression represents a personal standard that typifies the desires of a man who sought to become a great preacher of righteousness. In his missionary journal, the occasion of each talk he gave is noted, along with its length and content, and his evaluation of it. As a student at the University of Utah, he frequently spent his time while walking from campus to the family home on C Street mentally organizing and giving talks to himself. When he traveled by car as a general authority, he rarely turned on the radio. He was not interested in being entertained. For him, this was a good time to continue the practice of assigning himself topics and seeing how well he could develop them in his mind or what kind of a talk he could give to an imagined audience. Nevertheless, membership in this Church does not require one to be a great speaker. To one is given one gift, and to another, another.

**Question:** Elder McConkie dedicated the book to his father, Oscar W. McConkie. Do you have any idea what your grandfather McConkie's feeling was about the book?

**Response:** He told me that he "so prized his copy of Mormon Doctrine that if John the Revelator came and asked to borrow it" he would tell him, "Nothing doing. The book is not leaving my house. You can sit down and use it here, but you can't leave the house with it."

**Question:** As your father looked back on his life, would he have done anything differently as far as Mormon Doctrine is concerned?

**Response:** He did observe on a number of occasions that, perhaps, in writing the book he had done too much for its readers. "It may have been better for them," he said, "to have been required to find answers for themselves."

**Question:** Do you think he remained pleased with the work?

**Response:** Yes. Once, after I had been reading Brigham Young's sermons, I said to him, "No one



in the Church has ever spoken on the breadth of subjects that Brigham Young did." With a smile, he responded, "Have you ever read Mormon Doctrine?"

Look for part two in tomorrow's edition of Meridian Magazine

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