



KNOWING, DOING, & BEING: VITAL DIMENSIONS IN THE MORMON RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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Joseph Smith, in his famous letter to John Wentworth of the *Chicago Democrat*, maintained that for the Latter-day Saints the first principle of the gospel is faith in Jesus Christ. For purposes of this paper, I would like to extend that concept and suggest that faith or trust in Christ and his approach to life is not to be viewed simply as the first link in a chain of gospel principles, but rather as the central hub around which all other principles, revolve—first therefore in order of importance.

I am currently of the opinion that what Thomas a Kempis called the imitation of Christ is what the gospel or good news is all about, that it is the bond that binds together all of the teachings of the prophets from Adam to the present,¹ and that the ultimate purpose behind all the organizational and sacramental phenomena associated with the Church is simply to help bring everyone involved to a life style similar to that of Christ.

However, I personally am uneasy about the term "imitation of Christ" because it has always connoted to me a partial loss of one's individual initiative. So with apologies to the a Kempis followers, I will use a different terminology and speak rather of a "knowledge of Christ." I have chosen this phraseology following the lead of scriptural passages similar to John 17:3, in which Jesus states, "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent."

Since this passage is central to the thrust of this paper I would like to point out that salvation and exaltation in the Mormon sense of those terms are based upon our acquiring this knowledge of Christ. According to the Doctrine and Covenants (19:6-11) "eternal" is another name for God. Hence eternal life is God's life, i.e. life with God or celestial life. Thus, according to the passage in John, entrance into the celestial kingdom is predicated on one's

coming to know God and Christ.

This same point, it seems to me, is made in other scriptural passages. I will simply cite two others to illustrate my point. One of these comes from the Sermon on the Mount delivered near the beginning of Christ's ministry and one from the parable of the ten virgins near the end. Both passages were directed specifically to the membership of Christ's church rather than to the world in general.

First from Matthew 7:21-23. Speaking to some who had prophesied, exorcized, and done many wonderful works in His name—members of the priesthood of His Church, according to President John Taylor²—the Savior informs them at the time of their judgment that they must now depart from him, according to the King James Version, because He never knew them. However, Joseph Smith in his translation of the Bible significantly renders the passage to read: "And then will I say, Ye never knew me; depart from me ye that work iniquity." (Inspired Version, Matthew 7:33)

In the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), again directed to members of the Church,³ the same phraseology is used. The five foolish virgins are refused entrance into the presence of the bridegroom (Christ) because they lack knowledge of him. Again Joseph Smith changed "I know you not," to "Ye know me not." (I.V. Matthew 25:11).

These scriptures point emphatically to the conclusion that entrance into the presence of God or the celestial kingdom in the life beyond this is predicated on one's coming to know Him.

But how is the word "know" used in this context? Obviously there are several possible levels of meaning. "Know" might describe a casual acquaintance or at the other end of the spectrum connote complete empathy, literally an "in-feeling," a sense of total oneness with the individual involved so that in thinking and feeling like

him one understands him completely. I believe that the latter condition is what Jesus was talking of when he prayed to the Father that His disciples might be one with Him as He is with the Father: "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us." (John 17:21).

Ultimately this type of knowing, which I will call empathetic knowing, involves one's being like him in thought and character as nearly as possible given that individual's potential. When this oneness has been achieved then the purpose for the Church will have been accomplished. That is what I understand Paul to be saying when he writes concerning the organization of the Church, that it is to remain until "we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." (Ephesians 4:11-13). This type of knowledge of Christ represents for me the apex of faith in Him.

Now, having laid this initial premise, I would like to shift my focus slightly to address the problem of how one comes to know the Savior empathetically: (1) through knowing, in a cerebral sense that I will later distinguish from empathetic knowledge; (2) through doing; and (3) through being. Using this trifurcation of the larger principle I hope to illuminate some possible areas of concern for Latter-day Saints in our quest for life with God.

The first part of the triad is knowing in a cerebral sense, acquiring the factual information concerning the life and teachings of Jesus. Obviously one must first know *about* Christ before he can know *Him*. I think no one would argue with Paul when he states, "And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?" (Romans 10:13). There are, it seems to me, at least two important considerations: (1) What type information are we seeking? and (2) How does one seek this information?

One comes to know Jesus by studying *the man* himself rather than *the teachings* he espoused isolated from the facts of His life. My own experience has led me to the conclusion that we should do more to make Jesus the man a central focal point in our meetings and lessons. Theological principles become much more meaningful when viewed in the context of a life. People inspire us much more than principles do.

I suspect that is why Jesus repeatedly used himself as a visual aid of sorts. Rather than engaging in extended polemic, he often would simply remind His disciples that his life style was what they needed to know most. A brief reminder was sufficient: "I am the way; I am the truth; I am the light." Perhaps that is why in the sacramental prayer we are instructed to "always remember *Him*" rather than to always remember His teachings or His commandments. Recalling His life calls to mind his teachings, while the opposite is not always true. I am of the opinion that no lesson or sermon in the Church should be given that is not anchored firmly in the concreteness of the life of the Master.

I also believe that no study of Christ is complete without an accompanying study of mankind, his major project. I suspect that no one comes to know the Master until one comes to understand what He was attempting to do, and no one understands what he was attempting to do until he understands the problems of mankind which He addressed. For example, after reading the writings of

Sartre and Camus on absurdity, despair, and alienation or apathy, I think I understand much better the Savior's urgency in stressing the antithetical principles of faith, hope, and charity.

Through a study of man we discover the problems (and often the joys) of life; through a study of Christ we discover the answers to these problems. Neither is fully understood without the other. All of which leads my major concerns, students who come into my classes in the humanities feeling that no one outside the Church—especially those who deal with the suffering in life—have anything to teach them. Far too often we as a people become insular and talk only to and about ourselves. No one will begin to approach a measure of the stature of Christ in this life or the next until he makes an honest effort to understand the dimensions of life's problems.

As to *how* one seeks the cerebral knowledge of Christ the man I would suggest four major avenues: (1) through personal conversation with God in prayer, (2) through guidance from those who have in this life come to some knowledge of Him, (3) through participation in the ordinances of the Church, and (4) through a careful and constant study of the scriptures. I will just pass over the first two and comment briefly on the latter two.

We can better prepare our people for participation in the ordinances of the Church by talking more about the value of symbolic communication. To those students in my classes who complain about poets communicating indirectly through the use of metaphor and simile, I keep emphasizing the fact that the Savior was perhaps the greatest indirectionist of all. It was His style of teaching, even though it brought His apostles to a point of frustration at the last supper, for example, when they asked Him to speak plainly. It is a style of teaching that goes far beyond what can be done through more direct styles of discourse. I think we could all work more toward discerning the deeper truths that God has couched in simple ceremony.

I am also deeply concerned that our people seem so indifferent to the value of scriptures as a means of communication with God. Frankly I worry when I work with some of our returned missionaries in religion classes or adults in Gospel Doctrine classes who have been exposed to scripture all their lives, and I note the level of their perception. It seems to me that we of all people have been given an excellent opportunity to pursue knowledge through this channel; I wish we made better use of these opportunities than we do.

Some of the scriptures we know rather well. Scriptures used in defending the position of the Church on authority or Church organization, for example, are thoroughly familiar to our returned missionaries. And some among us, those I call the Carnivorous Christians because they seek a steady diet of meat with no milk to use Paul's metaphor, go beyond the mark in their desire to master all the esoteric doctrine unique to Mormonism and spend long ponderous hours pouring over scripture of that genre. There are other scriptures, however, that I feel we neglect more than we should. The neglected scriptures often teach the simple basics or milk of the gospel, those first and last principles such as faith, hope, and charity that to me are the things that really matter in an eternal sense. Simple they may be, but at the same

time they contain the most profound insights God has given us in our search to understand Him. And with apologies to my orthodox Jewish friends, I submit that God has served us milk and meat in the same dish, and I feel that we can do much more in seeking a knowledge and understanding of these.

I have listed "doing" as the second dimension in our quest to know the Savior. It is in this aspect of the Christian experience that one comes closest to what I would feel good about calling an imitation of Christ. Existential involvement adds depth to cerebral activity. I think I need not belabor this point. All of us have experienced the fact that reading or thinking about an activity is a very different phenomenon from actual participating in the same activity. Reading a romantic novel is never a fitting substitute for being in the arms of the one you love.

James has dealt with this point at great length in his general epistle. According to James, works are an integral aspect of the principle of faith. Works are the outward manifestation of the inward faith. Faith and works are not separate aspects of the gospel; they are two sides of the same phenomenon.

Religious activism has thrived in the soil of Mormonism. We have been kingdom builders from the first and are proud of ourselves for molding out of the sun-baked soil of the wilderness and carving out of the great granite of the mountains that socio-political phenomenon called the Great Basin Kingdom. That struggle against the wilderness has given us the focal point for our activity.

The mythos that a people weaves about itself tells much about the self image of the group. We have enshrouded ourselves with the mantle of ancient Israel and taken upon our shoulders the task of kingdom building. We have filled our hymns with the metaphors of labor and battle, even though these have mellowed somewhat with time. We no longer sing of treading on the necks of our foes, but we still envision ourselves as the hope of Israel, Zion's army. Last year I was with a group of saints at a sacrament meeting in Jerusalem, and we were singing the hymn, "Hope of Israel." Suddenly I started to listen to what I was singing, and the words took on a new context in that setting. As we sang of sounding the war cry and flashing the sword and rising in might to disarm the foemen, I thought of the Arabs passing in the street, and I suddenly got chills down my back, wondering what they would think of the hymns coming from our place of worship.

In these hymns we are continuously putting our shoulders to the wheel or sowing, daily sowing, or doing some good in the world today. Our arts in general have until recently glorified our pioneer heritage. We have had very little art commemorating the New York, Ohio, Missouri, or Illinois periods of Church history. Some of our art has been centered in the first vision and the restoration of the Aaronic priesthood, but primarily we have built monuments to the memory of the pioneers—families at gravesides at Winter Quarters, bedraggled soldiers of the Mormon Battalion, handcart companies, seagulls. We have chosen the beehive as our symbol, and much of the pioneer syndrome is still with us. When we talk of a person's spiritual well being, we speak of his being active or inactive.

Perhaps some of that is changing with the worldwide expansion of the Church. The pioneer metaphors do not work as well as they once did when the Church was primarily a Utah phenomenon. The hymn "I Am A Child of God" may be replacing "Come, Come, Ye Saints" as the way we choose to sing about ourselves. At the BYU Mormon Arts Festival last spring the pioneer theme was noticeably absent. If these casual perceptions are accurate, then perhaps that in itself says something about what may be happening to us as a people.

It will be interesting to see how we view ourselves as doers in years to come, for it seems to me that we are headed in two different directions currently. Ironically, as our field of operation as a Church enlarges from the Great Basin Kingdom to the world, our focal point of emphasis as a people is contracting from the world or Church as a whole family setting. Does this mean that in the future the bulk of our people will become more cosmopolitan and urbane in their outlook or more insular and provincial?

One of the most important questions one must ask concerning the stamp of activism, however, centers in what is happening internally as a result of all our doing?

This brings me to the third point of the triad, which frankly concerns me most because it receives so little attention. That is the principle of "being," what we become as a result of our cerebral knowledge and our activity. Far too often we work on the assumption that if we continue with the externalities of religious activity that all will be well with us.

We always ask, "What must a person *do* to enter the celestial kingdom?" when we catechize our youth. The answer comes back, "Be baptized and married in the temple." While this response is accurate as far as it goes, I think the implications our young people draw from this type of question are clear. I would like to see us rephrase the question to ask, "What must one *be* to enter the celestial kingdom?" I think the discussion this question would generate might be far more profitable in terms of our ultimate quest.

Whereas in the hymn "I Am A Child of God" we used to sing "teach me all that I must *know* to live with Him someday" (which I would suggest in passing raises some extremely interesting questions), now we sing "teach me all that I must *do* to live with Him someday." We have three verses in "I Am A Child of God." I would like to see us keep the first chorus as it was and sing "teach me all that I must *know*." The second chorus we could sing "teach me all that I must *do*," and then with the third sing "teach me all that I must *be* to live with Him someday." And then I think we will develop the full picture of our goal.

Our attitude toward *doing* is perhaps based on the well established fact that we will ultimately be judged by our works and the term "works" has come to connote only external activism. But it seems to me that the Lord judges on the internal climate of an individual as well as on the external activity. When we judge an act as good or bad, like Samuel seeking David, we often judge solely by the exterior.

The Lord, however, looks upon the heart; if the character that motivates the action is not good, then the work, by definition, is not good. Mormon writes, "By

their works ye shall know them . . . For behold, God hath said a man *being* evil cannot *do* that which is good." Note that he does not say they cannot perform what outwardly seems to be a righteous act, but rather that the act is not counted as a good work in the eyes of God. He continues, "If he offereth a gift, or prayeth unto God, except he shall do it with real intent it profiteth him nothing. For behold, it is not counted unto him for righteousness . . . wherefore he is counted evil before God. And likewise also is it counted evil unto a man, if he shall pray and not with real intent of heart." (Moroni 7:6-9). That is an interesting concept, praying oneself into hell.

It is not my intent to belabor this point because I think it is the same one made by Paul in his famous epistle on love (I Corinthians 13). According to Paul, a person may have all knowledge and give everything he has for the building up of the kingdom, including, ultimately, his life. However, if he has not acquired the attribute of love as the dominant aspect of his personality, he remains a cipher so far as the celestial kingdom is concerned.

Love is our ultimate goal, love and its many subdivisions. In his second epistle Peter, who knew Christ well, writes, "And besides this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue, knowledge; and to knowledge, temperance; and to temperance, patience; and to patience, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, charity."

Then note carefully the following verse. "For if these things be *in you*, and abound, they will make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the *knowledge* of our Lord Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 1:5-8). Here then is the ultimate definition of what I have been calling empathetic knowledge, the quality of becoming more like Christ. Into the hands of such a person God can deliver all that He has, including the sword of His power for He knows for certain that it will be sheathed in the scabbard of gentleness and understanding and forgiveness.

It is relatively simple to gain knowledge of the cerebral variety. It requires more effort, perhaps, to perform as we ought. However, restructuring the human personality is the most difficult of all tasks. Some of you have read Ben Franklin's account of his experiment in this realm. He isolated one attribute of character to work on each month, but finally gave up his project of self-improvement in discouragement. He found the key—no pun intended—of drawing lightning from the heavens to his soul. He tried to do it on his own, as some of us do, by a sheer display of will.

I do not believe that we can change our character totally by ourselves no matter how many goals we set nor how strong our will power. That appears to come as an act of grace, as a gift of God. We seldom talk about grace in the Church except to use it as a foil in a discussion of salvation by works. Still the Book of Mormon, like the writings of Paul, is filled with such doctrine.

I do not mean to imply that we can do nothing about aiding in this dispensation of grace into our lives. I am emphatically not a Calvinist. But I believe we change only when we reach the point that we have "a broken heart and a contrite spirit," to use scriptural terms, when we reach the point that we realize we can do nothing on our own and then surrender our pride and yield ourselves to God's direction. William James was right when he locates

such phenomena at the edge of our extremity. In conditions of financial and social success such a surrender is obviously difficult for most of us.

Whereas we now pray like of Augustine of old—"Give me virtue and deliver me from concupiscence, but not yet, not yet"—we learn in our Gethsemane to pray to Christ in His. We will probably not receive angels to strengthen us, but I believe that we will receive strength beyond our own, for I am not speaking of a stance which is totally passive. For the Christian the surrender of one's own will is the most courageous act possible, involving as it does not a surrender of effort but a redirecting of will that requires far more effort, thought, and creative energy than the old stance. It seems to me a frightening thing to kneel before God and ask for your assignment as a Christian rather than presenting Him with a list of things you want done that day.

The qualities of character we seek in the climate of our inner souls as Christians are few in number. Paul's list of the fruits of the spirit by which a Christian is known includes the following: love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance. (Galatians 5:22-23). Note that the list is almost identical with Peter's. Ten small words, but in them resides eternal life. These are the inward core of good works; the outward manifestations are legion.

Joseph Smith lists these same qualities as the prime motivations from which all priesthood activity should flow. Let me conclude with a statement from that same letter from which the section on priesthood (D & C 121) was extracted, written by the prophet from Liberty Jail. I wish that it also had become part of our scripture.

"The things of God are of deep import, and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity—thou must commune with God." And then he concludes, "How much more dignified and noble are the thoughts of God, than the vain imaginations of the human heart!" (DHC 3:296).

It is there, in the human heart and its feelings, that we should look ultimately for our record of achievement as a people and as individuals. It is there that we develop our knowledge of Christ and come to understand the meaning of faith in Jesus Christ as the first principle (the prime principle) of the gospel from which all other principles flow. It is there ultimately that we qualify, with the help of God, for eternal life.

Footnotes

¹John the beloved (Revelation 19:10) defines the spirit of prophecy as the testimony of Jesus. I interpret this to mean that the motivating spirit behind all that the prophets had to say was their testimony of Christ and his mission.

²From a sermon at a conference of the Salt Lake Stake, January 6, 1879. See Smith and Sjodahl, *Doctrine and Covenants Commentary* (Salt Lake, 1957), pp. 462-463.

³Harold B. Lee in CR, October 1951, pp. 26-27.

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