



Familyolatry

By Christian Ryder

Through his ancient prophet Moses, the Lord declared, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3). This commandment has been renewed in our dispensation with the observation that



"every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own God, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol" (D&C 1:16). Brigham Young made this modern application explicit when he stated, "I would as soon see a man worshipping a little god of brass or of wood as to see him worship his property. . . . and he would be as much justified in the sight of God"

Unfortunately, the danger of idols and idolatry are not limited to graven images and material possessions. If these were the only false gods we had to avoid, many of us might be relatively safe.

However, as President Kimball has observed, "Whatever thing a man sets his heart and trusts in most is his god; and if his god doesn't also happen to be the true and living God of Israel, that man is laboring in idolatry" (*Ensign*, June 1976, p. 4). If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, idolatry is in the heart of the idolator. Thus, anything other than God himself can be an idol.

In recent decades, the Church and its members appear to have fallen prey to a new kind of idol: the traditional family. Consider, for example, the degree to which our teachings and practices are based, at least in substantial part, upon the assumption that the traditional family is the key to our spiritual progress or approach to God: For the first time in the recorded history of Christianity and Mormonism we are introducing the gospel of Christ with the slogan, "Families Are Forever." We offer a Sunday School course on family relations. Regular family home evening has become the guarantee for keeping children active in the Church. We stress temple marriage as the sure foundation for a successful family and a happy life. We encourage more than ever before family economic preparedness and self-sufficiency. We teach that the traditional family is the most effective, if not the only, refuge from the wickedness of the world. We preach that a return to the structure and values of the traditional family is the solution to our present social and moral problems. We are taught that "no success can compensate for failure in the home," and that "the greatest work we ever do will be within the walls of our own home." Missionary farewells and homecomings have become sacrament meeting spotlights on the family. In short, the traditional family appears to be the common denominator of the Church; and our religion and church activities have become primarily a family affair.

In contrast, Brigham Young told departing missionaries of his day to keep their minds "riveted—yes, I may say riveted—on the cross of Christ" (*JD*, 12:33). Similarly, Jesus applied the first of the Ten Commandments directly to the traditional family when he warned his disciples, "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (*Matt.* 10:37). On another occasion Jesus declared: "If any man come to me and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple" (*Luke* 14:26).

Not only does such an idolatrous imbalance come between us and God, it also seriously affects how Latter-day Saints view themselves, the gospel of Christ, and the purposes of the Church. Our preoccupation with the family, for example, has led us to make unsupportable statements to the effect that heaven will not be heaven if each member of the traditional family is not there. Certainly the casting out of one

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third part of heaven did not destroy God's heaven. While we should teach the gospel to each family member and encourage the practice of family home evening, we cannot promise that no child will ever go astray. Nearly all the prophets and patriarchs had children who exercised their agency to reject God. Adam had Cain, Lehi had Laman and Lemuel, Abraham had Ishmael, Isaac had Esau, and Jacob had eleven sons. It is hard to believe that family home evening would have cured all that.

More significantly, overemphasis on the family runs the risk of creating a division between those who are part of an apparently successful traditional family and those who for some reason are not, including the adult unmarried, the divorced, the single parent, the widow or widower, the parentless child, the childless parent, the parent with problem children, the child with problem parents, the poor and sick, the needy and afflicted. These people already suffer under the heaviest financial, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual burdens. I worry that our constant emphasis on the successful traditional family creates pressures and burdens on the very ones the Church is supposed to help and makes their association with the mainstream family-oriented Church a painful and sometimes unbearable experience. I fear that our traditional family focus may alienate and estrange the very foreigners and strangers we should be embracing as fellow citizens in the household of God.

Instead of relegating such individuals to a lower class, perhaps we should be redefining as the common denominator of the Church the special interest of all members in the spiritual family of Christ. The family of Christ's Church should be knit together by the unity of Christian faith, the ordinances, and the mutual desire to establish Zion and see the face of God. Jesus warned that a focus on his family would inevitably create divisions in the traditional family: "the father shall be divided against the son, and the son against the father; the mother against the daughter and the daughter against the mother," and so forth (Luke 12:51-53). But he certainly never intended the focus on the traditional family to create a division in the family of his Church.

It may seem incredible to some that something as wholesome and lovely as the traditional family could become an idol. Yet it is the very goodness of the family that makes it the object of idol worship. The most dangerous idols are those which are so closely identified with God or bear such strong resemblance to him that worshippers sincerely believe they are honoring the real God. Thus, while the brass serpent was a graven image which Moses made at the Lord's command (Num. 21:9), it later became the object of idolatrous worship (2 Kgs. 18:4). Likewise,

the holy scriptures and even the family of Abraham, in spite of their close relationship to God, became idolatrous obsessions for the Pharisees and other Israelites (John 5:39-40, 8:33, 39).

How have we come to focus so much attention upon the traditional family? In an 1858 discourse on idolatry, Brigham Young cited examples of idol worship among various peoples and identified a common origin of idolatry:

What is commonly termed idolatry has arisen from a few sincere men, full of faith and having little knowledge, urging a backsliding people to preserve some customs . . . to put them in mind of that God with whom their fathers were acquainted, without designing or wishing the people to worship an idol. Idols . . . were not introduced at once. They were introduced to preserve among the people the idea of the true God. . . . This is the way that idolatry has sprung up in the world, through a method established to keep the people in remembrance of the God they once worshipped and were acquainted with.

Brigham also prophesied that future idolatry would likely result from efforts of the Church to keep the Saints from backsliding:

Let this people backslide—lose their present faith and knowledge, and in after generations, perhaps, a few would cling to the Priesthood with all the vigour we do, and would understand that the people were going into darkness, and would urge them to have some custom, some form, some representation of their former faith and religion. (JD, 6:194-96.)

Significantly, general conference addresses in recent decades indicate that the leaders of the Church are increasingly concerned about members backsliding, becoming inactive, and falling away from their religion. I believe that Church leaders at all levels have championed the traditional family out of a sincere belief that the structure and values of the traditional family would protect Church members against the sinful practices of our age, encourage their continued activity in the Church, and help them remember their religion. At the same time, however, the Saints have been prone to wander and forget their God and neglect truth and knowledge. The net result is the establishment of familyolatry, at least for those who believe the approach to God is through the traditional family.

To the extent the traditional family is an idol, what can be done to eliminate familyolatry without smashing the idol? The cure for familyolatry is not the debunking of the traditional family, but the careful and consistent preaching of true Christian doctrine concerning man's relationship and approach to God. That is, we should not be tearing down the traditional family, but rather building up the family of Christ.

To do this, our approach to the traditional family must always be tempered by two facts:

(1) salvation is only in and through the family of Christ; and (2) the family of Christ is *not* the traditional family. When Jesus was teaching on one occasion, his mother and brothers approached “desiring to speak with him.” Because of the press of the crowd they could not get near him. “Then one said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren stand without, desiring to speak with thee. But he answered and said unto him that told him, Who is my mother and who are my brethren? And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall [hear the word of God and] do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.” (Matt. 12:46-50; Luke 8:19-21.) Though Jesus greatly loved his earthly family, he wanted everyone to understand that the family of God is *not* the biological family, but the spiritual family made up of those who hear his word and do the will of his father.

As wholesome and wonderful as our traditional family might be, we cannot afford to confuse it with the spiritual family of Christ. It is by the name of Christ Jesus that we are saved, not by any other family name under heaven. It is not through natural birth and maturation in a traditional family that we are made alive and perfect in Christ, but through the waters of baptism, the spirit of justification, and the blood of sanctification. Regardless of whose seed sired us, we must each receive the penetrating word of God in our hearts and do the will of God to have eternal life.

We must also resurrect the correct idea of man’s relationship to God and the pathway by which he approaches God. There is a tendency among modern Mormons to believe that since we are the spirit children of God, we have the spark of divinity within us which needs only to be fanned by our good works in the traditional family to become a blazing fire of godlike attributes and righteousness. The popular notion is that God has given us the raw talent, but we must develop it. The traditional family is the laboratory or clinical phase of our learning to be gods.

The problem with this line of thinking is that it ignores the fall of man and trivializes the atonement of Christ. The Book of Mormon teaches plainly that because of the fall of Adam all mankind, including Mormons, are in a state of nature described variously as “spiritually dead” (Hel. 14:16), “lost,” “fallen” (Alma 12:22), “unworthy” (Mosiah 4:11), “hardened” (Alma 34:9), “evil” (Ether 3:2), “worthless” (Mosiah 4:5), “carnal, sensual, and devilish” (Moses 5:11; Mosiah 16:3-4). We are “cut off from the presence of the Lord” (Hel. 14:16), and are unable on our own merit or power to regain His presence. Although spirit children of God, our spirit family connection will not save us. Even Satan

and the third part of heaven who were cast out can say, “I am a child of God.” Because the natural man is as much a devil in embryo as a god in embryo, he is “an enemy to God” (Mosiah 3:19).

According to the Book of Mormon, the only cure for this condition is to “yield to the enticing of the Holy Spirit and [put] off the natural man and [become] a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord” (Mosiah 3:19). This is accomplished through faith in Christ, repentance of all sin, submission to the ordinances, and enduring to the end.

As we stress the importance of the traditional family which is in the likeness of God, we must not ignore the infinitely greater importance of becoming part of God’s spiritual family. As we encourage temple marriage and sealing, we must also teach that temple ordinances are not primarily for the purpose of strengthening the traditional family but for endowing us with knowledge, priesthood keys, and power sufficient to approach God and become kings and priests and queens and priestesses unto him. When we say that “families are forever” we must always remember that the traditional family is forever only upon the condition that each member is adopted into the spiritual family of Christ. As we testify of the happiness that can be experienced in a good traditional family, we must remind ourselves that ear hath not heard and eye hath not seen what great things the Lord has prepared for those who join his family. When we encourage traditional families to make the home a refuge or safe haven from the world, we must acknowledge that only Zion, a separate society of the pure in heart, can provide such peace and safety.

We must stop talking as if we Mormons have some monopoly on the traditional family and instead humbly invite all people, regardless of their traditional family status, to join the family of Christ through the priesthood ordinances entrusted to us. We must bury the notion that we can become like God through our own good works and resurrect the truth about our fallen nature and our total dependence upon the mercy of God through the merits of Christ.

We may place our love and affection upon any person or thing, so long as it does not come before our love and affection for God. Nothing—be it brass serpent, scripture, family of Abraham, or traditional family—is allowed to come between us and him. Only God can save and sanctify individuals and traditional families. To this end the Church must be more than a museum to display Saints and model Mormon families; it must also be a hospital to treat the wounds of sinners and broken families and make all well in the family of Christ.

CHRISTIAN RYDER is a free-lance writer living in Salt Lake City.

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