

Finding the kingdom within

HINDERING THE SAINTS

TAKING AWAY THE KEY OF KNOWLEDGE

By Philip G. McLemore

“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering.” Matthew 23:13

“Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered.” Luke 11:52

PREVIOUSLY, I HAVE WRITTEN TWO ARTICLES for SUNSTONE about meditation and the need for the development of a mystical tradition within Mormonism. Since I’ll be building on the concepts presented in those articles, I have provided a brief summary of them in the first endnote.¹ The previous articles can be read in their entirety on SUNSTONE’s website.

Religious organizations instinctively develop teachings, practices, and cultures that tend to keep its members at early stages of spiritual development dependent on the organization. These stages are characterized by obedience, conformity, loyalty, a narrow view of morality, and external religious conduct. Though helpful at first, a focus on these qualities can become limiting and restrictive once an individual’s full spiritual potential begins to unfold. In theory, the purpose of a church organization is to guide one into an actual knowledge of God, which leads to spiritual rebirth and entrance into the Kingdom; however, in practice, churches ultimately hinder this transformative awakening and knowledge so that the organization can maintain its primacy. The human consequence of this organizational tendency is boredom and frustration since children of God with infinite, divine potential—who are ready to mature into the

wonderfully mysterious and exciting stages of divine relationship and knowledge—are continually retained at the first grade of gospel teaching, while their souls ache for graduate instruction in the mind and heart of Christ.

This is the classic struggle between exoteric—or external religion—and esoteric religion, the internal or inner path to Oneness with God. All ancient spiritual masters, including Jesus, have clearly taught that the process of spiritual maturation moves from the exoteric, concrete, and external religious/spiritual practices to the esoteric, subtle, unseen, inner practices. The exoteric is necessary and foundational but was never intended to be the end-game.

While serving as an Episcopalian priest in the 1940’s, Alan Watts wrote *Behold the Spirit*, a book attempting to restore a vibrant mysticism to the Christian Church, which Watts felt had fallen into a deadening orthodoxy. Early in the book he makes an insightful observation that I think is amazingly relevant to contemporary Mormonism:

Today, in Church and out of Church, there are thousands of souls who realize in varying degrees of clarity that what they want from religion is not a collection of doctrinal and ritual symbols, nor a series of moral precepts. They want God himself . . . they want to be filled with his creative life and power; they want some conscious experience of being at one with Reality itself . . . they do not know that creed and sacrament are only fully intelligible in terms of the mystical life.

And they do not know these things because the stewards and teachers of the Church do not, for the most part, know them either. For while holding officially that eternal life consists in the knowledge of God—and nothing else—churches of every kind are concerned with almost everything *but* the knowledge of God . . . What is the use of moral principles without moral power and moral vision? Knowledge of God, the realization of one’s union



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the way which leads to life, and
there are few who find it.**

with God, in a word, mysticism, is necessary.

It is not simply the flower of religion; it is the very seed, living in the flower as its fulfillment and preceding the root as its origin. There is not “higher religion” without mysticism because there is no apprehension of the meaning of reality without mysticism . . . And here is the problem. Mystical religion is not a technique, a remedy that may be humanly applied. It is the operation of the Holy Spirit.²

As a past master of the exoteric/external path, I can testify that mental, emotional, and cultural attachment to exoteric religion is a hindrance to entering the Kingdom or presence of God.

TWO EVENTS IN 2010 motivated me to address this issue. The first was the decision by the Church to use *Gospel Principles* as the study manual for priesthood quorums and the Relief Society for a two-year period. As I remember, this book was originally intended for young men entering the military, who in most cases had not or would not serve missions. It provided them a source of basic information about the doctrine and history of the Church for personal and group study. It was later expanded for use in new member classes and to assist parents in teaching their children. To require the use of this elementary text in classes and quorums of adults who had studied and lived the gospel and served in responsible positions for decades was insulting at best and spiritually hindering at worst. It also ran contrary to the Apostle Paul’s admonition to church members he felt should be weaning themselves from spiritual milk to spiritual meat, “Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.”³ Perfection means maturity and wholeness, a preparation for unity with God, not a return to spiritual childhood, which Paul describes in I Corinthians 13 as knowing “in part.” If the Church only allows its members to know “in part,” then it is taking away the key of knowledge that opens the Kingdom.

The second thing that fueled my resolve on this topic was a startling omission from lesson 15 of the Old Testament teacher’s manual for Gospel Doctrine class. As one of two Gospel Doctrine teachers in my ward, I was excited when I realized I would be teaching this lesson, which included one of my favorite verses in the Old Testament: Numbers 11:29. Before looking at the manual, I was already pondering the significance of this verse and its potential for encouraging members to expand their vision of spiritual development. Earlier in chapter 11, an overwhelmed Moses chooses 70 elders under the Lord’s direction to help him govern Israel; the Lord then blesses these elders with his spirit and they begin to prophesy. Joshua is upset by this and tells Moses to “forbid them.” But Moses

responds in verse 29, “Enviest thou for my sake? Would God that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!”

Moses was not jealous or afraid of others receiving spiritual gifts and abilities; in fact, he desired them for all! Surely, I thought, this would provide the substance for a great discussion in Gospel Doctrine class. But, when I finally looked at the teacher’s manual, I was stunned. This spiritually expansive message in verse 29 was glossed over in favor of an emphasis on the rebellion of Aaron and Miriam against Moses in chapter twelve and the teaching that Church authorities have greater access to revelation than ordinary Church members. One of the suggested questions was, “What are the limits to our right to receive revelation?” There was no spirit of limitation in Moses’ statement. To use this lesson to focus on the supposed limitations of Church members instead of using it to build faith in an unlimited domain of spirit within all of us, which can be successfully pursued with the grace and love of God, is hindering to internal spiritual development.

George Pace was a popular religion professor at Brigham Young University who encouraged students to develop a richer prayer experience and a deeper relationship with God and Christ. Many students and other faculty members responded to this invitation with excitement. Unfortunately, a number of immature and self-deceived individuals acted unwisely, which understandably prompted a General Authority response. In this case, it was Elder Bruce R. McConkie who addressed the issue at BYU in 1982.⁴ However, instead of attempting to bring maturity and balance to the desire and efforts of the students and faculty who were seeking deeper spiritual growth, Elder McConkie publicly spanked George Pace and stigmatized “excessive zeal” and lengthy prayers. He advocated staying in the “mainstream” of the Church and its “normal and usual pattern of worship.” He also encouraged listeners to “maintain a reverential barrier” between themselves and the members of the Godhead.

Sadly, the “mainstream” of the Church and its “normal and usual pattern of worship” tend to focus on the external, resulting in few members experiencing spiritual transformation or rebirth even after decades of gospel living and service. It seems to me that Nephi, Jacob, Enos, and Alma all exhibited both tremendous zeal and a commitment to lengthy prayers in order to know the things of God.⁵ Luke tells us that Jesus spent “all night in prayer.”⁶ Can I become Christlike if I only spend five minutes in prayer? The “reverential barrier” part of Elder McConkie’s admonition seems odd to me in light of the New Testament encouraging us to become brides of Christ, and Jesus’ prayer for us to be one in him as he is one with the Father.⁷

The approach Elder McConkie took makes the Church more easily managed, but at what price? I occasionally challenge Church members to pray for an hour at least once a week because I know it will stretch them to move beyond their “vain and repetitious” five-minute prayers and result in the expansion of their souls. To this day, older

members resist my invitation by quoting from Elder McConkie's 1982 speech.

THE SCRIBES, OFTEN referred to as lawyers, were the learned class who copied, edited, and taught the scriptures. They were known for their knowledge of the Law of Moses, which was Israel's sole civil and religious authority. Their official interpretations of the meaning of the Law eventually became more important than the Law itself. Following the Law and the traditions that had grown up around it became the measure of one's devotion and spirituality.

The Pharisees were a religious and political party known for insisting that the Law be observed as interpreted by the scribes.

Jesus's condemnation of the religious leaders of his day asserted three things:

1. That they were hypocrites.
2. That they did not understand the inner meaning of the Law and the scriptures.
3. That they had set up a system to measure spiritual status and worthiness that emphasized external religious practices, thus neglecting the inner path of spiritual rebirth, which is "the key of knowledge."

I do not believe that LDS Church authorities are hypocrites. However, Church teachings often do not reflect the inner meaning of the scriptures. Our spiritual emphasis seems focused on external status, image, worthiness, and religious practices. As in Israel in the time of Jesus, the inner path of communion with God and spiritual transformation is woefully neglected, which hinders the Saints.

If Jesus were to come in disguise to a contemporary Latter-day Saint to talk about the process of being born again, I wouldn't be surprised if the conversation were similar to the one he had with Nicodemus.⁸

Like many "good" Mormons, Nicodemus was an expert in checklist spirituality and external compliance. After he greets Jesus and expresses his recognition that God is with him, Jesus jumps right to the bottom line and says, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus then asks, "Can a man enter the second time into his mother's womb?" Jesus's lack of a direct response to this question is the sign of a spiritual master who knows that either a yes or a no response to this question will be misunderstood. (The answer is yes since the womb of creation is the presence of God and we are "born again" by reentering this presence.) Instead, Jesus simply goes on, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." So first we "see" the kingdom through increased spiritual perception as we begin the sanctification process, then we "enter" it as we are reborn into Oneness with God.

In the Church, we typically interpret "being born of water and of the Spirit" as referring to the external ordinances of baptism and the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, as if Jesus were inviting Nicodemus to a baptismal

service at the local ward the next Saturday. In fact, external ordinances are *symbols* of subtle, inner, spiritual processes that are a part of the mystical (mystery) dimension of spiritual rebirth.

The puzzled expression on Nicodemus's face then leads Jesus to say, "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit." Jesus is clearly referring to the subtle, inner process of spiritual rebirth and not to external ordinances.⁹ Even though the phrase "born again" is also present in the Book of Mormon, most Latter-day Saints are uncomfortable with the expression since they are unfamiliar with inner, spiritual processes, and so like Nicodemus, "marvel."

Nicodemus responds to Jesus's mystical description of spiritual rebirth by saying, "How can these things be?" Jesus replies, "Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?" Do we as Latter-day Saints "know these things?" Do we understand the *inner* meaning of the scriptures? Are we close to entering the Kingdom? Most of us seem stuck with the checklist of external practices. Even those who know that a sanctification process is preliminary to spiritual rebirth either believe it is reserved for a select few or that it is a process that comes to fruition only in the next life. The few who do understand the inner meaning and mystical dimension of the scriptures are still hindered since the practices of inner sanctification are not taught or encouraged in the Church. The "key of knowledge" has been taken away.

When Jesus told the parable of the Prodigal Son,¹⁰ he was addressing both sides of the problem of using an external focus for solving life's problems and developing spiritually. The younger, Prodigal Son becomes lost in sin and worldliness. The more mature Elder Son, who describes himself as having never transgressed the Father's commandments, is clearly being used to depict those who are lost in status, performance, and appearance—a spiritually deadening, external religious path. Of course, at the end of the story, as happens in many of Jesus's stories, it is the sinner—or the one without status—who "comes to himself," approaches the Father and enters his Kingdom. The implication seems to be that it can be harder to escape from the false security of exoteric spirituality than from the pignen of sin and worldliness.

SO WHAT HAPPENS in Mormonism when the predominant focus is on a system of status, image, worthiness, and external religious/spiritual practices? Unfortunately, a variety of absurdities that range from the tragic to the humorous emerge. I'll provide just a few examples:

1. My first mission president in Brazil was determined to have the top baptizing mission in the world, and his system was successful. My first year, we had 5,000 baptisms with 189 missionaries! But behind the scenes, missionaries were being dragged out of their beds at midnight and threatened

with physical violence if they didn't meet super-inflated goals. Other missionaries were bribed with leather coats and material rewards for increased baptisms. The president was so busy cracking the whip that he did not have time to interview the missionaries or read their monthly letters to him. I found hundreds of such letters that had spent many months in the trunk of a leader's car. I read some of them. They contained the stories of missionaries suffering with personal problems and feelings of failure for having not baptized 50 people a month.

Our most successful missionary, the one designated for many months as the "Kingdom Builder," enticed hundreds of young boys into LDS chapels to see a "free movie," which was the filmstrip *Christ in America*, and then offered them a new soccer ball if they would be baptized. Other missionaries pressured timid, poor people, or simply accepted people who wanted to be their friends but who had not attended church and had no intention of living gospel standards. Once their goals were met, many missionaries hung out with girls, went to movies or bath-houses, or slept in and listened to music. Since I refused to participate in these activities, I was demoted from district leader to junior companion and sent way out into a small, two-missionary city so that I would not be a "bad influence." It was estimated that 50–75% of returned missionaries from that period of my mission went inactive.

I believe that at some point, the "truth claims" of the Church have become linked with raw, numerical growth. Even today, in spite of Elder Boyd K. Packer's vision of missionaries being inspired gospel teachers instead of slick salesmen, Church culture causes way too many of our missions to be managed like Toyota factories, which results in the spiritual abuse of investigators and damage to, if not destruction of, the faith of many of our young missionaries. If we want to eliminate "excessive zeal" in the Church, I recommend starting with the missionary program and not prayer.¹¹

2. A bishop told a woman I know that he could tell if her husband had had problems with pornography the previous week by the color of the shirt he wore on Sunday! If the husband chose to not wear a white shirt, the bishop assumed that he had indulged. In light of that thinking, this sister doubted that they would ever receive intelligent or inspired help from that bishop.



**Do not be conformed to this world,
but be transformed by the
renewing of your mind, that you
may prove what is that good and
acceptable and perfect will of God.**

3. One of my daughters was visiting with a group of sisters in her ward when one of them abruptly excused herself, explaining that her family was going to work in the yard all day so they could have a yard "worthy of a Stake calling." Who knew that worthiness was predicated on a pretty yard?

These are the nonsensical types of things that happen when an external focus becomes predominant. It's no wonder that intelligent, spiritually mature non-members have a hard time taking us seriously when they observe us

tussling over shirt color, cola, chocolate, and earrings like they are major spiritual issues. This sort of surface religious wrangling is a distraction from the inner path of spiritual rebirth.

Jesus was incensed when he saw people linking spirituality to status, money, power, or performance. Too often in Mormonism, status and power are used to influence members; and the famous, rich, and powerful are often considered to be more blessed and spiritually superior. Some professional counselors and psychologists I know have told me that a large percentage of the Mormons who come to them feel inadequate and deficient, and that they tend to be externally oriented when attempting to meet their needs. Why is it that the members of a church that teaches more clearly than any other about divine potential and the eternal worth of each soul¹² feel so guilty, inadequate, and deficient? If the theology is not the problem then the problem must be in the way we teach, in our cultural emphasis on following and obeying external measures of status and worthiness, which rarely by themselves lead to inner transformation.

THE #1 LDS mantra is, “I know The Church is true.” It gets branded on the souls of our children and they grow up learning that if it is “the Church” that is true, then the thing they need to be concerned about is their status with and within the Church. Therefore, if they attend their meetings, serve missions, accept callings, and marry in the temple, they’ve fulfilled their spiritual quest. But the soul is not so easily satisfied.

Many Church members I know who are insightful and emotionally mature, or just hungry and thirsting for deeper spiritual development, are looking outside of usual LDS worship, service, and spiritual practices. They are taking yoga classes, going to meditation seminars, or attending personal growth or therapy programs. Many do so discretely so as not to appear suspect or unfaithful. Occasionally, we get a substantive message like Elder Dallin Oak’s October 2000 General Conference address, “The Challenge to Become,” that puts the external focus in its proper perspective and encourages us to seek inner development. However, we don’t have the culture, practices, and traditions that support inner development. In fact, we fear them.

As Alan Watts writes, “A Christianity which is not basically mystical must become either a political ideology or a mindless fundamentalism . . . Lacking mystical experience, religion is only a futile straining to follow a way of life for which one has neither the power nor the grace.”¹³

Consider this statement from the Apostle Paul, “We do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”¹⁴ To “see” that which is “not seen” is clearly a reference to inner, spiritual perception. Now consider Jesus’s statement, “Enter by the narrow gate . . . Because narrow is the gate and diffi-

cult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.”¹⁵ Why is the gate narrow and the way difficult? Why do so few find it? Because it is discovered within each of us, in the “unseen” dimension. Mormon culture is so focused on the external that very few Saints are experiencing the spiritual transformation that comes from going within.

Consider Jesus’s response to the religious leaders of his day who were also externally focused, “Now when he was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them and said, ‘The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, See here! or See there! For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.’”¹⁶

The kingdom of God is within each of us, but one of the results of the Fall was a transfer of identity from our core spiritual nature to what the Book of Mormon calls the “natural man,” which is external in its understanding, orientation, and experience and thus prone to the foibles and flaws of the “seen” and “temporal” world. But the absorption of our identity into the “natural man” in no way negates the truth that we were given birth by divine parents and therefore possess all of the characteristics, qualities, and potentials of God—this is the kingdom within.

Mormonism has tremendous potential to engender an inspiring, fruitful mystical tradition. But despite the many scriptural encouragements and enticements to pursue the mysteries or the inner path, our culture still discourages it and emphasizes the “basics.”

ACCORDING TO DOCTRINE & Covenants 84:19–27: Ancient Israel gave up the quest for the “mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, even the key of the knowledge of God” and instead of receiving the sanctifying and perfecting influence of the Holy Spirit and God’s grace, they were given a “preparatory gospel” and “carnal commandments”—external performances. Later, scribes and Pharisees added their own systems for measuring status and worthiness and even more external performances. Have we, like Ancient Israel, also given up the quest for mystery and the knowledge of God? Have we, like the scribes and Pharisees, crafted our own system of worthiness and external performances? Have we, as Latter-day Saints, rejected the “fullness of the gospel” and the mystical purpose of the greater priesthood, substituting a “back to basics” preparatory gospel and a Latter-day Law of Moses? Do we refuse to enter the kingdom ourselves and hinder those who are close to entering?

The Old Testament, New Testament, and Book of Mormon repeatedly detail the tendency of human beings to reject the inner path of mystery and divine knowledge in favor of external religion at best or worldly pursuits at worst. We also learn from Doctrine & Covenants 84, and from the teachings of Jesus and Paul, that the preparatory gospel and laws of carnal commandments do not sanctify us, nor do they lead us into the kingdom of God. We’ve been teaching the gospel basics for decades and now have a generation of

Latter-day Saints who are leaving the Church *en masse*. Our response to this development is to make the basics more basic and to continue to teach the false notion that keeping carnal commandments results in spiritual rebirth! If that were true, the Elder Son in the parable of the Prodigal Son would have been sanctified, forgiving, and joyful instead of judgmental and lacking in compassion and love. External commandment-keeping is necessary but ultimately sterile without entering into the mystery: the flow of God's grace.

Those Latter-day Saints who are stuck on the notion that obeying external commandments is the most important spiritual practice are rejecting the teaching of the Apostle Paul that the purposes of the law and commandments are: 1) To reveal the nature of sin and ungodliness in each of us. 2) To demonstrate that we as "natural men" are incapable of keeping the commandments and that obedience to external commandments is not spiritually transformative. And, 3) To lead us to the saving and perfecting power of grace.

The realization that we cannot avoid all sins or become like Christ through obedience to external commandments is not meant to condemn or discourage us but to motivate us to seek the inner path of spiritual rebirth by which we transcend the "natural man" and become "new creatures in Christ."

The Apostle Paul called the Law of Moses a "school-master" which leads us to Christ who then saves us by grace. Being "saved by grace" is the process of the inner path and spiritual rebirth. The "we" who is incapable of fully keeping external requirements is what Paul refers to as "the flesh"—as opposed to what he calls "the inner man" or those who live "in the Spirit."¹⁷ The Book of Mormon uses the terms "natural man" or "carnal man" or also "flesh" in the same manner. The "inner man," of course, is our essence of being—our eternal, spiritual nature.

Most human beings experience themselves as a unique collection of physical sensations, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, fears, needs, and desires all intertwined around a story of who they think they are in relation to what they perceive the world and others to be. This cocktail of perception and experience of self is part of the flesh—the external, temporary world. Since it lacks eternal reality, it is always going to leave one with a sense of inadequacy and deficiency.

This "flesh" or "natural man" is also not perfectible because it is a *fiction*, a story of limited perceptions and experiences. That is why Mormons, or any other religious people, can devote decades to trying to perfect themselves but still end up disappointed and frustrated. The "natural man" cannot be purified no matter how many commandments we try to pile on it. Its destiny is to be crucified with and in Christ as we join him in the spiritual rebirth of Oneness with God. We resist because "the flesh" is the main way we experience ourselves and we don't want it to die. But, of course, the gospel is *about* the death of the "natural man" and a resurrection and newness of spiritual life.

The gospel is not about making the "natural man" a good person who is "worthy" of the kingdom. All our efforts to do so will fail and keep us identified with this inadequate, defi-

cient, fictional self. In Romans 12:2, Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind [spirit], that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." In other words, without transformation, you cannot realize the perfect will of God because the "natural man," which is conformed to this world, cannot do it. This transformation and rebirth can only be realized when we shift our identity and sense of self from the external "natural man" to our divine, inner nature. This can only take place on the inner path of grace.

The Book of Mormon, like the New Testament, declares clearly that it is only in and through the grace of God that we can be saved, or sanctified and perfected. Paul says we are saved by grace and not of ourselves, not of works, lest man should boast—it is a gift.¹⁸ His point is that the function of the "natural man" has nothing to do with salvation or rebirth. It is the *obstacle*.

Moroni's formula for spiritual rebirth¹⁹ is to "deny ourselves of all ungodliness" and "love God with all your might, mind, and strength" so that "by his grace we may be perfect in Christ." Since ungodly thought and behavior only drags us deeper into the "natural man," keeping moral laws and commandments helps to stabilize our lives and environment so we can begin to love at the soul level. This type of love for God is impossible when our attention is focused on sin (the Prodigal Son) or on our status, worthiness, and success in external obedience (the Elder Son). It is only possible as one learns the practices of the inner path, such as meditation and contemplative prayer, where one communes spirit to spirit with God. It is this communion that gives us access to the purifying influence of the grace of God that perfects us or restores our soul nature.

THERE ARE TWO reasons Mormons generally reject Paul's and the Book of Mormon's teachings about being saved or perfected by grace: 1) We have overreacted to false doctrines of grace being taught in other Christian churches. 2) We have misunderstood the nature of the Atonement.

In response to the grace teachings of many Christian churches, which improperly minimize the need for individuals to live responsibly and morally, Latter-day Saints have created their own false teaching that we are saved by a combination of keeping commandments and God's grace. We love to quote 2 Nephi 25:23, "For we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do," with the emphasis on the *doing*, as if grace is a cherry put on the top of our sundae of good works. Thousands of times in Sunday School and Seminary and Institute classes, I've heard it explained that our good works get us right to the gate of the Kingdom, but since we are still not quite perfect, we need that last little push of grace to get us in. This teaching implies that grace is God's acceptance of the faithful member's final weaknesses and failures instead of a sanctifying love and power that perfects us in Christ.

But Doctrine & Covenants 93:12–13, 20 tells us that just

as Jesus received God's fullness by receiving "grace for grace" and by continuing "from grace to grace" so must we.²⁰ In other words, grace is not the cherry on top of a sundae of good works, it is the ice cream, whipped cream, *and* the cherry placed by God's hand into our bowl (being) which we have emptied of the "natural man." The work of the inner path is letting go of our attachment to and identification with the "natural man" and learning how to receive this wonderful, mysterious grace and love of God. It is then that we experience "the light burden" and the "rest of the Lord" since we are not caught up in trying to perfect that which is not perfectible. Paul describes this "natural man" dilemma quite delightfully in Romans 7:18:

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me but how to perform what is good I find not. For the good that I will to do, I do not; but the evil I will not do, that I practice . . . I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity . . . O wretched man that I am!

As we receive "grace for grace," the old "natural man" patterns and habits are weakened. As the inner being is cleansed, the outer being becomes clean as well, and suddenly one can easily make choices in harmony with one's divine nature. At that point, according to Paul and Nephi, the law becomes dead unto us.²¹ We have matured and no longer need a code to tell us how to live.

I've often heard the Atonement explained as an event that Jesus performed in a particular time and place. But the Book of Mormon is clear that the Atonement is infinite and eternal,²² meaning that it resides in a timeless domain and therefore cannot be an event that took place in time and space. In my experience, the Atonement of Christ is the grand symbol for the mystery of Oneness with God and the redemption experienced as this mystery is realized through spiritual rebirth. Oneness with God is and has always been the ground of existence and being. We lost that awareness in order to gain the wisdom that comes from partaking of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Through mortal birth, our bodies and minds became that tree as we lost ourselves in the interplay of good and evil. Through spiritual rebirth we are restored to our essential and joyful Oneness with God—the Atonement.

What Jesus did in Gethsemane and on the cross was not to perform the Atonement, but to reveal the reality of it and the inner, spiritual processes we should practice in order to awaken into it. These processes include complete devotion to God's will, renunciation and crucifixion of any and all "natural man" tendencies, and submission to the inner work of grace.

Salvation by grace is the easiest and hardest thing one can experience. It is easy since it is done in the embrace of God's

love. It is difficult because we have to consent to the death of the "natural man." At the point of its death, the natural man will cry out, "Why are you forsaking me?"²³ hoping to keep you attached to it. But if you have experienced the divine nature of your soul in communion with God, then you can let it go, let it die, and pray, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" as you enter the Kingdom.

Our misapprehension, if not rejection, of the inner path of salvation by grace has blinded us to the joyful mystery of the Atonement and has hindered Latter-day Saints from using the "key of knowledge" to enter the kingdom of heaven.

The crisis in Mormonism is no longer the result of attacks from the outside but a result of internal restlessness and boredom—the loss of bright, sensitive, creative souls who are being hindered from entering a kingdom of love and light that they sense is near. Spiritual life should be vibrant, fresh, and ever new. We need a living faith that can grow with its members and such can only come from a mystical religion. Again, from Alan Watts in *Behold the Spirit*, "the religion of Jesus has become a religion *about* Jesus, and lost its essence . . . the whole point of the Gospel is that everyone may experience union with God in the same way and to the same degree as Jesus himself."²⁴

This is most elegantly expressed in 1 John 4:17–18, "Love has been perfected among us in this; that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear . . . he who fears has not been made perfect in love."

Fear is the state of the "natural man;" perfected love is the state of unbroken intimacy with God. I recently spoke with the wife of a middle-aged LDS gentleman who was dying of cancer. She was fearfully going over the standard LDS checklist of commandments and ordinances, acknowledging that her husband wasn't perfect but hoping that he was "good enough" and that he had "done enough." With little or no knowledge of and experience with the inner kingdom, far too many Latter-day Saints are approaching death with doubt and anxiety instead of love and confidence.

Don't let our culture of external performance distract you from knowledge of the inner path, from the sanctifying influence of God's love and grace, from the direct knowledge of the goodness of your spiritual essence and from the joy of Oneness with God. You can and will have boldness in the Day of Judgment if you have already been inside the Kingdom. Let no one hinder you.

NOTES

1. "Mormon Mantras: A Journey of Spiritual Transformation," SUNSTONE, April 2006, 20–31; "The Yoga of Christ", SUNSTONE, June 2007, 30–45.

Summary: A. The language, culture, and practice of modern day Mormonism has evolved in such a way as to strengthen the Church organization at the expense of individual, spiritual growth.

B. Mysticism is the quest for direct experience with God. Without a mystical dimension, no religion or church will empower or lead its members to spiritual transformation. Pursuit of the mysteries, which is encouraged in the

scriptures and usually discouraged by the Church, is the awakening to the mystical dimension by which one can directly experience his/her own infinite and divine nature and the nature and presence of God.

C. An inner spiritual discipline such as meditation or contemplative prayer is absolutely necessary for one to consistently experience actual communion with God. Abiding in this communion is sanctifying and can lead one to spiritual rebirth and the unfolding of a Christlike nature. Deep meditation and prayer, which guides us from ordinary, human perception and thought to pure, spiritual perception, is not taught nor encouraged in the Church.

D. We need an expanded understanding of the person, mission, and teachings of Jesus and his Atonement for vibrant spiritual living. His teachings and the symbols of his life, death, and resurrection are best understood from a mystical perspective, which point to inner, spiritual processes that result in the death of the “natural man,” the resurrection of a Godly nature, and an abiding in oneness with God. This transformation is the purpose of our lives and can be experienced, enjoyed, and shared now in this life, rather than something hoped for in the next life. Abiding in this Oneness with God is how we enter the “Kingdom of God.”

2. Alan Watts, *Behold the Spirit* (New York: Random House, 1971), 14–15.

3. Hebrews 6:1,2 New King James Version (NKJV). In Joseph Smith’s Inspired Version, a “not” is added so the line reads “not leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, lets us go on unto perfection.” The “not” does not reverse the meaning since the point of the verse is for us to “go on” to perfection. The “not” simply clarifies that the elementary or basic teachings are not abandoned but subsumed into higher stages of spiritual understanding. It is ironic that Paul’s list of basic principles to “leave” look very much like the chapter titles in Gospel Principles!

4. Bruce R. McConkie, “Our Relationship with the Lord,” BYU Devotional Address, 2 March 1982.

5. 1 Nephi 18:3, 2:16; Enos 1:2–4; Jacob 7:5,12; Alma 8:10. These prophets used expressions like “cry,” “wrestling with God in mighty prayer,” “labored much in spirit,” and talked about prayers and spiritual processes that lasted for an entire day or several days to be forgiven and redeemed and to “see angels” and to “hear the voice of God.” These accounts stand in stark contrast to our “normal and usual pattern of worship.”

6. Luke 6:12; Mark 1:35

7. 2 Corinthians 11:2 and John 17:21–23

8. John 3:1–10

9. In the Bible, the word “wind” was also used for breath and spirit. In Genesis 2:7, man experiences his mortal birth when God “breathed into his nostrils” and he became “a living soul”. In John 20:22, Jesus “breathed” on his disciples and said to them, “Receive ye the Holy Ghost.” Mirroring man’s mortal birth in Genesis, Christ is breathing in the Holy Spirit, which makes spiritual birth possible. Like the wind, the movement and effect of the Holy Spirit cannot be controlled by man but only received. In meditation and contemplative prayer, one’s practice of a technique does not produce the spiritual perception and purification that ultimately result in spiritual rebirth, but rather stills body and mind so one can receive the winds of grace and sanctification as and when they flow.

10. Luke 15:11–32

11. I joined the church at age 19 and was called on a mission the next year. Oddly I was almost a victim of the infamous “Baseball Baptism” program at age 12, until my mother intervened. My first Mission President made the scandal of “baseball baptisms” seem like child’s play with the outrageous things that took place under his regime. For the record, my second Mission President was a Christlike gentleman who restored sanity and spiritual teaching to our mission and who cared for the missionaries as if they were his own children. I’ve spoken with dozens of returned missionaries and their heart-broken parents over the past few years who have either left the church as a result of their mission experience or remain active to please their families but do so with bitterness or indifference.

12. The exceptions are the mystics or mystical elements within these denominations.

13. Watts, *Behold the Spirit*, xiii

14. 2 Corinthians 4:18 NKJV This is a beautiful description of the essence of Hinduism—which is based on discernment of the Real from Unreal—and Buddhism, which emphasizes awareness of the Permanent and Impermanent. Sadly many Hindu and Buddhist sects have also devolved into sterile externalism in spite of the foundation and tradition of being an inner, mystical path!

15. Matthew 7:13–14 NKJV. “Narrow” and “difficult” is more accurate than the King James’ choice of “strait” and “narrow.”

16. Luke 17:20–21. Many Christian and Mormon Biblical scholars prefer to translate or interpret “within” as “among” implying that Jesus was referring to himself. This is done by people who have little understanding of the inner path and in violation of the language, structure, and context of the passage. See Ilaria Ramelli, “Luke 17:21: The Kingdom of God is Inside You: The Ancient Syriac Versions in Support of the Correct Translation,” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 12, No. 2, 259–286; Raymond B. Marcin, “The Kingdom of God is Within (Among) (In the Midst of) You”, www.biblicaltheology.com/Research/MarcinR01.pdf.

17. Galatians 5:19–21; Ephesians 3:10

18. Ephesians 2:8–9

19. Moroni 10:32–33

20. These verses also emphasize “keeping commandments,” but not all commandments are external practices. Admonitions to “be perfect (whole, complete),” to “receive grace,” to “love one another as I have loved you,” etc., are commandments that require inner, spiritual disciplines.

21. Galatians 2:19; 2 Nephi 25:25

22. 2 Nephi 9:7

23. Matthew 27:46. Jesus knew his Father would not forsake him. He also knew in Gethsemane when he uttered the words in Matthew 26:39, “let this cup (of suffering) pass from me” that it was not possible. In both cases he is giving expression to our “natural man” which feels forsaken and that it suffers too much in mortality. Jesus’s teaching and the symbolism of his suffering and death clearly communicate the need for us to surrender the “natural man” to crucifixion so we can be reborn in Christ and become One with the Father.

24. Watts, *Behold the Spirit*, xvii, xix

THE LEGACY OF LAZARUS

No one knew how the two
leagues apart in distance and ambition
became so tightly bound in flesh
death could not shear asunder.

Perhaps a childhood misadventure
or adolescent fantasy
sewed their souls together so
there was no crease between them.

Lazarus the confidant
was the one who listened
absorbing every disappointing sorrow
into dust,
melting every dark night into dawn.

He could rinse the clouds away
with the yes inside his eyes,
could grace His sails in the doldrums
with the crease of hope across his cheeks

Without a word, in his bosom
Jesus slaked His thirst for solace,
found the strength to breathe the heat
that still sparks our spines today.

JEROME L. MCELROY