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### Christ: The Life (Chs. 48–55)

Author(s): Michael D. Rhodes

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# Christ: The Life

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Michael D. Rhodes

In Part III of *TWL*, Roberts arrives at the third element in the title of his book: “The Life.” As Jesus Christ is “the Truth” and “the Way,” so is he also “the Life”—the one perfect example of how everyone should live. These chapters are written in a direct, declarative style with such clarity and plainness that they require little explanation or elaboration.

For Roberts, the hallmark of Christ’s life was a total submission to God’s will and total fidelity and obedience to God’s commandments. Christ’s is “the Life” that each person should strive to emulate in mortality. This emulation is necessary, Roberts says, because mortal life must be understood in the context of our premortal existence. Mortal life is a period of testing to prove one’s worthiness to return to God’s presence.

Roberts defines “the Life” almost exclusively by reference to the scriptures. He uses very few other sources in these chapters. In his use of the scriptures, he concentrates especially on the New Testament; he turns to the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, or the Pearl of Great Price only when no biblical reference is available for the point he is trying to make or when the scriptures of this dispensation offer stronger or more specific readings.

Roberts points to the law of sacrifice revealed to Adam and then to the Ten Commandments given to Moses as a foundation for “the Life.” Christ’s teachings during his mortal ministry more clearly teach and define “the Life,” which Jesus summed up in the two great commandments: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind,” and “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matt. 22:37–39). These commandments are most significant in *TWL* because Roberts sees the love of God as a natural consequence of coming to know God. The same is true of loving others. As humans come to understand that they are literally children of God and have the

potential to become like him, they will come to love each other and want to help each other to reach their full eternal potential.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, “the Life” is more than a system of ethics or humanitarianism. The ordinances of the gospel are also essential (486). In Roberts’s words: “It [the Life] is a new birth, a spiritual power; it is a conformity to the purpose of God, a spiritual union with God, and a submission to his will, and a careful performance of all that he has ordained as necessary to the completion of ‘the Life!’” (486).

Robert devotes two chapters to the Sermon on the Mount, which he regards as Christ’s blueprint for “the Life,” a life that Christ not only fully taught but perfectly lived. Christ expresses the ideal of his teaching in the statement: “Be ye therefore perfect” (Matt. 5:48). In his handling of the Sermon on the Mount, Roberts concentrates primarily on the account in Matthew (he considered Luke 6 to be a report of Jesus’ words on a different occasion). He supplements the Matthean text, however, with the version of the sermon found in 3 Nephi 12–14. For example, he uses 3 Nephi to show that Christ’s admonition to “take no thought for the morrow” was directed only to the twelve disciples and not to members of the Church in general.

In chapters 52–53, Roberts deals with what he calls the “Christian character,” which is set forth in the teachings of the ancient apostles and Church leaders (Peter, Paul, James, Jude, and John).<sup>1</sup> Fundamental to these New Testament teachings, Roberts maintains, is the central principle of God’s plan from the beginning: “We will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them” (Abr. 3:25). In other words, Roberts again emphasizes the theme of obedience.

For Roberts, the purpose of earth life is to obey the commandments and submit to God’s will in all things, to live “the Life” that Christ taught and lived. By fulfilling this purpose, the faithful can return to live eternally with God. Roberts thus sets forth the same eternal principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ that all the prophets and apostles have taught since the beginning.

In chapter 54, Roberts presents briefly the main laws and commandments of the New Dispensation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Not surprisingly, the Word of Wisdom is explained first, since this law of health and wisdom was a favorite theme at this time in the administration of President Heber J. Grant,<sup>2</sup> who in 1930 made “abstinence from the use of alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tea . . . an official requirement for those seeking temple recommends.”<sup>3</sup> Roberts, however, does not dwell on abstinence from alcohol as the essence of the Word of Wisdom,<sup>4</sup> but rather emphasizes the philosophical and spiritual aspects

of this revelation, which promises that those who observe its principles will find “wisdom and great treasures of knowledge, even hidden treasures” (D&C 89:19). This key to the pursuit of knowledge ties directly into the themes of *TWL*.

In addition, Roberts outlines briefly the laws of charity, consecration, and obedience. Roberts draws these religious duties largely from the doctrines of the temple. Hence, the weight that Roberts places on these particular laws and commandments is understandable and appropriate. The law of tithing, implementing the law of consecration and stewardship, is seen primarily in its capacity of caring for the poor. In the 1920s, prior to the organization of the Church welfare program, local bishops and Relief Societies cared for the poor, drawing upon funds supplied by fast offerings, tithing, and Relief Society donations.<sup>5</sup>

In chapter 55, Roberts discusses chastity, marriage, and the family. As the culminating temple ordinance that follows the LDS endowment ceremony, eternal marriage serves as a fitting conclusion to *TWL*.<sup>6</sup> Roberts, himself still married at this time to plural wives under pre-Manifesto practices, praises those who had sacrificed so much to live the law of plural marriage when it had been commanded by the Lord. Chapter 55 and its addendum, however, teach strict monogamy. These sections give very interesting perspectives on LDS attitudes toward society, marriage, morality, and ethics in the 1920s.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Paul, in Gal. 1:18–19, refers to James, the brother of Christ, as an apostle. Perhaps James was ordained an apostle to replace James, the brother of John, after the latter was killed by King Herod. There is no evidence, scriptural or otherwise, that Jude, another of Christ’s brothers, was an apostle.

<sup>2</sup>President Grant favored prohibition, which was repealed in 1932. Thomas G. Alexander, “The Word of Wisdom: From Principle to Requirement,” *Dialogue* 14 (Autumn 1981): 78–88; and Brent G. Thompson, “Standing between Two Fires: Mormons and Prohibition, 1908–1917,” *Journal of Mormon History* 10 (1983): 35–52.

<sup>3</sup>Joseph L. Lyon, “Word of Wisdom,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 4:1584.

<sup>4</sup>Roberts himself favored the repeal of prohibition. Alexander, “The Word of Wisdom,” 84.

<sup>5</sup>Bruce D. Blumell, “Welfare before Welfare: Twentieth Century LDS Church Charity before the Great Depression,” *Journal of Mormon History* 6 (1979): 89–106.

<sup>6</sup>The final chapter in Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology* (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855), is also about the laws of marriage and procreation.