



Type: Magazine Article

The Book of Mormon — A Guide to Religious Living: X. Functional Religion

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Source: *The Instructor*, Vol. 83, No. 10 (October 1948), pp. 461-464, 481

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

The Book of Mormon — A Guide to Religious Living

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X. FUNCTIONAL RELIGION

IT is possible for people to think themselves religious when they are not. Under the guise of religion, men of all ages have cultivated a type of living which contradicts the true nature of religion as taught by Jesus and the Prophets. Let us consider a few examples of ways of thinking and behaving which have paraded wrongfully in the name of religion.

1. *The worship of the letter of the law.* In Jesus' day there were scribes and pharisees so intent upon keeping the law of Moses that the law became an end in itself more important even than the people for whom the law was intended. The law, originally given to serve human welfare, became something divorced from human needs and values.

Jesus, with His great love of men, was bound to run into serious and frequent conflict with those who placed religion above and apart from the main issues of life. The Savior's clashes with the Pharisees over sabbath-day observance provoked His great statement, "The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath." (Read Mark 2:23-28 and Luke 13:10-16.)

The apostle Paul, trained in Pharisaic devotion to the law as the essence of religion, caught a new vision of the nature of religion through his conversion to Christ. Love of God, faith in Christ, and love for men supplanted his love for the law—"for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." (II Corinthians 3:6.)

2. *Belief in a sterile theology.* Men have long been comforted because they have entertained, as they thought, correct theological beliefs. They have felt secure in their salvation because they belonged to the right people who were in possession of proper beliefs. The ancient Israelites fall also into this category. They looked upon their chosen lineage—not as a responsibility and opportunity to realize true religion—but as a witness of their own exalted position among the children of men.

Amos must have shocked them when he said, speaking for the Lord, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth: *therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.*" (Amos 3:2.)

John the Baptist, perceiving the same reliance upon a belief divorced

from right living among the Pharisees, said,

"... O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham." (Matt. 3:7-9.)

Paul's memorable teaching on faith, hope, and love (I Cor. 13) was inspired by the bragging and quarrelling among Corinthian saints over the possession of spiritual gifts.

3. *The performance of ritual and ceremony.* Some people reduce the religious life to participation in certain forms of religion. This, too, became an evil in Ancient Israel, an evil that provoked the wrath of the prophets and inspired some of the loftiest expressions of true religion.

"I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols. But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream." (Amos 5:21-24.)

4. *Exalting the institution as an end.* It is also common for organizations, originally created for some worthy purpose in human life, to become an end in themselves. The

people come to exist for the sake of the institution. This trend is evident in government, in labor unions, in trade associations, in universities, and even in family life and in churches.

The religion taught in the Book of Mormon avoids these evils. There the reader will not find worship of the law, stress on a sterile theology, reliance on ritual and ceremony, or a blind devotion to the church. Religion in the Book of Mormon is dynamic and functional. It is never divorced from man. Underlying the entire book, we believe, is a warm human interest. Theology, ordinances, the law, and the church are there to bring about changes in the lives of men—to inspire Christian living. One can read the Book of Mormon and lay it down with the feeling that "man was not made for religion but religion was made for man." One also gains the conviction that if one's religious living does not promote human welfare and happiness, it is not true religion in the eyes of God.

Let us illustrate how the Book of Mormon relates its religion to human life again and again.

Belief in God

In King Benjamin's farewell address to his people (note Mosiah 2-4, especially chapter 4) he tells them to believe in God. But he is soon out of the realm of abstract theology inviting them to love God. For, if you love God, he said, you will "grow in the knowledge of him that created you, or in the knowl-

edge of that which is just and true.” (Mosiah 4:12.)

“And ye will not have a mind to injure one another, but to live peaceably, and to render to every man according to that which is his due. And ye will not suffer your children that they go hungry, or naked; neither will ye suffer that they transgress the laws of God, and fight and quarrel one with another, and serve the devil, who is the master of sin, or who is the evil spirit which hath been spoken of by our fathers, he being an enemy to all righteousness. But ye will teach them to walk in the ways of truth and soberness; ye will teach them to love one another, and to serve one another. And also, ye yourselves will succor those that stand in need of your succor; ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need; and ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain, and turn him out to perish.” (Mosiah 4:13-16.)

Baptism

In an earlier article on baptism it was noted that baptism is our witness that we take upon us the name of Jesus Christ and live as it becomes disciples of His to live. The Nephites who made that covenant carried it out in human relationships. The ordinance was not the end but inspiration to live one with another as it becometh saints to live. (Read Mosiah 18.)

“And again Alma commanded that the people of the church should

impart of their substance, every one according to that which he had; if he have more abundantly he should impart more abundantly; and of him that had but little, but little should be required; and to him that had not should be given. And thus they should impart of their substance of their own free will and good desires towards God, and to those priests that stood in need, yea, and to every needy, naked soul. And this he said unto them, having been commanded of God; and they did walk uprightly before God, imparting to one another both temporally and spiritually according to their needs and their wants.” (Mosiah 18: 27-29.)

The Sacrament

The Book of Mormon contains some original and beautiful teaching concerning the sacrament. (Read III Nephi 18 and Moroni 4 and 5.) Here again an ordinance is not a formality nor a ritual which in itself brings salvation, but a source of inspiration to be true Christians. Note carefully the words in the sacramental prayer, how intimately they are linked with life.

“O God, the Eternal Father, we ask thee in the name of thy Son, Jesus Christ, to bless and sanctify this bread to the souls of all those who partake of it; that they may eat in remembrance of the body of thy Son, and witness unto thee, O God, the Eternal Father, that they are willing to take upon them the name of thy Son, and always remember him, and keep his com-

mandments which he hath given them, that they may always have his Spirit to be with them. Amen." (Moroni 4:3.)

There is a passage in which Jesus instructs the Twelve not "to suffer anyone knowingly to partake of the sacrament unworthily lest he eateth and drinketh damnation to his soul." Then follows this warm, considerate, kindly statement which shows the Savior's deep interest even in the wayward.

"Nevertheless, ye shall not cast him out from among you, but ye shall minister unto him and shall pray for him unto the Father, in my name; and if it so be that he repenteth and is baptized in my name, then shall ye receive him, and shall minister unto him of my flesh and blood. But if he repent not he shall not be numbered among my people, that he may not destroy my people, for behold I know my sheep, and they are numbered. Nevertheless, ye shall not cast him out of your synagogues, or your places of worship, for unto such shall ye continue to minister; for ye know not but what they will return and repent, and come unto me with full purpose of heart, and I shall heal them; and ye shall be the means of bringing salvation unto them." (III Nephi 18:30-32.)

Life in the Nephite Church

Moroni, chapter 6, gives us a description of life in the church of Christ among the Nephites. It was indeed a church interested above all else in the welfare of people. Life was simple. Life was good. People

met together to minister unto the well-being of their souls.

"And after they had been received unto baptism, and were wrought upon and cleansed by the power of the Holy Ghost, they were numbered among the people of the church of Christ; and their names were taken, that they might be remembered and nourished by the good word of God, to keep them in the right way, to keep them continually watchful unto prayer, relying alone upon the merits of Christ, who was the author and the finisher of their faith. And the church did meet together oft, to fast and to pray, and to speak one with another concerning the welfare of their souls. And they did meet together oft to partake of bread and wine, in remembrance of the Lord Jesus. And they were strict to observe that there should be no iniquity among them; and whoso was found to commit iniquity, and three witnesses of the church did condemn them before the elders, and if they repented not, and confessed not, their names were blotted out, and they were not numbered among the people of Christ. But as oft as they repented and sought forgiveness, with real intent, they were forgiven." (Moroni 6:4-8.)

George Santyana, of Harvard University fame, once defined a fanatic as one who doubled his speed after he had lost his direction. Religion offers people a fertile field for fanaticism and also for false and shallow interpretations of life.

—more on page 481

LIBRARIANS

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Available now at the offices of the Deseret Sunday School Union are accession sheets for the Sunday School library. The sheets are standard looseleaf size (8½ x 11 inches) and punched for three-ring binders. They are ruled for recording the accession number, name of author, name of book, and other pertinent data. Instructions for filling out the sheets are given in the new Sunday School *Librarian's Guide Book*. Price of the sheets is twenty-five cents a dozen.

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NOTE TO CHORISTERS AND ORGANISTS

An article discussing the use of music in the Junior Sunday School which will be of interest to many choristers and organists may be found in the Junior Sunday School department of this *Instructor*, page 493.

THE BOOK OF MORMON (Continued from page 464)

The Book of Mormon teaches the kind of religion which will help us keep our feet on the ground. Its religion is fundamental in emphasis and helpful and good. One reason for this is its underlying interest in man—in his becoming a true disciple of Christ, a worthy Son of God.

An understanding of people, a knowledge of the purpose of life, a deep respect for people, a love for

all men—these are things which underlie the gospel as taught in the Book of Mormon. These are things which help to make its religion good. These are interests which will also enrich our own religious living day by day.

Readings in the Book of Mormon: Mosiah 2-4, 18; Alma 1:26-33; 34:17-28; III Nephi 18 and Moroni 4-6.

"For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother." (Matthew 12:50.)