

Forgiving the Church and Loving the Saints: Spiritual Evolution and the Kingdom of God

By Robert A. Rees¹

During the five years I have served as bishop, I have become increasingly aware of the fact that what we speak of as “the Church” has a much more complex, multi-faceted, and variable set of meanings than I had ever before realized. I have also become aware that we tend to act and to govern in the Church as though everyone had a common understanding of the gospel and an equal ability to live its principles. Because of this, at times we may tend to misjudge others, to condemn them for not abiding by our personal view of what the Church should be, and to exclude them from what we may experience--or assume--as our more advanced and elevated fellowship. Our spiritual work as both individuals and as a church is impeded by our failure to recognize that the Church has many faces and that we are all at different stages of moral development along a continuum we call the Plan of Salvation.

These realizations have come as I have heard many individuals express their feelings and thoughts about the Church and as I have become increasingly aware of the evolution of my own relationship to the Church and the complexity of my feelings about it.

The Church as Mirror

What is the Church? To different people under different circumstances, the Church may be experienced as: the kingdom of God on earth, an entrenched bureaucracy, a rigid hegemony, a safe haven, the political kingdom of God, a monolithic social structure, a place of refuge, a male chauvinist enclave, a rigid religious order, a cult, the one and only true church.

I once had a conversation in print with Karl Keller entitled “Letters of Belief” in which we offered divergent views of the Church. Karl said that the Church is a society that “is indeed a clean, safe, pleasant, hope-filled place, ...but it is also mindless, artless, anti-humanistic, simplistically nationalistic, crudely authoritarian, uninteresting.” I countered, “The Church...is imperfect. [However,] it is the best instrument the Lord has, given our agency, to effect His purposes. If

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it is at times inefficient, backward, repressive, it is also at times instructive, progressive and liberating. The Church is like us...I'll go one step further: the Church is us; it is no better or no worse than we are (and that includes you and me), for the Church is what we make it."²

The Church, which so readily serves as a symbol either for ambivalent feelings about authority or for a nurturing family, tends to call forth strong emotions. Consider the variety of feelings people have about the Church. Others have expressed to me all of the following: They love the Church, they hate the Church; they respect the Church, they fear the Church; they are devoted to the Church, they are indifferent to the Church; they feel nurtured by the Church, they feel excluded from the Church. Some seem to experience no negative feelings toward the Church; others seem to be in a constant state of conflict with it.

Let me cite a concrete example. About a year ago, I received a letter from a friend who had this to say about the Church: "I find myself more and more at odds with the institution of the Church. My resentment about how women are treated and the authoritarianism that seems to be growing in this growing institution are making my activity in the Church very uncomfortable to me. What seemed to be a community of which I could feel a part is now a kind of machinery that moves the work along. My activity in my own ward seems empty and meaningless. I feel a part of the huge machine, and I don't believe in the machine any more."

This woman and I have been friends for a number of years and have had countless discussions about the gospel and the Church. During the time she wrote this letter she was feeling estranged from the Church. She is a bright woman with a far-reaching intellect, and she is also an artist whose work is original and imaginative. During our many conversations, I have tried to listen to her feelings, to express understanding, and to reaffirm my faith, in the enduring goodness of the Church.

Not long after she wrote to me, this woman took a trip to Utah to attend a family reunion and visit friends. The trip was a turning point in her relationship with the Church. This is what she wrote upon returning:

"As the plane touched down in Salt Lake, a peaceful feeling came over me, a longing, and memories of all that was Mormon about me. This was my homeland and I was coming home." After a week of remarkable personal spiritual experiences, most of which came as surprises to her, she wrote, "And so I came home from this week-long trip having felt gently led by the spirit on a special journey. This journey was one of healing, of discovery, of reconciliation, of reuniting, of the sweet peace that such openness [from friends and relatives] in such a place can bring. I came back wishing I could live there. But soon I realized

² "Letters of Belief: An Exchange of Thoughts and Feelings about the Mormon Faith," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 9:3 (1973): 11-13.

that it was meant to renew me, to revive the spirit in me so I can undertake the journey of my life.”

Reveling in her newfound peace and reconnection to her Mormon cultural roots, she returned to church with renewed hope. She wrote, “I went to church again for the first time in a long time...I shared my new-found enthusiasm to reconnect and get to know people on a spiritual, personal level. I have stopped asking why the Church doesn’t meet my intellectual and social needs and started asking how I can serve people--how I can come to know and love them. And I already feel love flowing back and forth as the barriers come down.” Feelings are rarely so simple as the story to this point would indicate. Recently my friend had her name removed from the records of the Church.

To illustrate how individuals may react in vastly different ways in relation to a common experience, I cite an example from Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*. In this novel, Ahab, in his megalomaniacal quest for the white whale, nails a gold doubloon to the mast of the *Pequod* as a reward to the first man who sights the whale. As they seek the elusive leviathan, each of the characters on the ship comes up and looks at the doubloon, and each sees something different. For Ahab it is the prophetic emblem of his quest; for Starbuck it is a Puritan sermon; for Stubb it is an almanac of the zodiac; for Flask, the pragmatist, it is “but a round thing made of gold...worth sixteen dollars”; for Queequeg it is merely “an old button off some King’s trousers”; for the dark and ghostly Fedallah it is the sign of the Devil; and, finally, for the mad black boy Pip it is a reflection of the mad world itself: “I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look. And I, you, and he; and we, ye, and they, are all bats.” As Ahab says, “This round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician’s glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self.”³

Like Ahab’s doubloon, the Church is a mirror into which all the Saints look and see a reflection of their unique, individual selves. It reflects back to each of us what we are and where we are in our moral or spiritual development. Obviously, there are many of views about the Church, a variety of attitudes toward it, and a variety of possible relationships with it.

Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development

To develop this idea further, I refer to the research of Lawrence Kohlberg, a Harvard psychologist who in the 1950s developed what is now commonly referred to as “the Kohlberg Perspective.” Based on his research, Kohlberg postulated a paradigm consisting of six stages of moral development. He concluded that the different motives people have for doing what is right depend on their stage of moral development. At Kohlberg’s first stage, people are

³ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: The Library of America, 1983) 1253-58.

motivated by the avoidance of punishment, loss, or discomfort. Here people see the power of authority as superior and tend to be obedient for the sake of obedience itself. At the second stage, motivation is based on serving one's own needs and interests. At the third stage, people are motivated by the need to be seen as good in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. They have a "desire to maintain rules and authority which support stereotypical good behavior." The motivation at the fourth stage of moral development is related to the interests of institutions. The emphasis here is on obedience to laws, rules, and authority. Those at this stage seek to avoid the breakdown of the system that results when everyone acts out of self-interest. At the fifth stage, there is a "sense of obligation to law, because of one's social contract to make and abide by law for the welfare of all, and for the protection of people's rights." The guiding principle at this stage is "the greatest good for the greatest number." Finally, the sixth stage is characterized by a belief in "the validity of universal moral principles, and a sense of personal commitment to them." The emphasis here is on the welfare of individuals rather than on rules or laws.⁴

Because his original research was conducted primarily among white Western males, Kohlberg's ideas have been challenged, and legitimately so, as having both cultural and gender biases.⁵ My purpose here is not to delve into the controversy over Kohlberg's research methodology, but rather to use his paradigm of moral

⁴ Lawrence Kohlberg, Charles Levine, and Alexandra Hower, *Moral Stages: A Current Formulation and A Response to Critics* (New York: Karger, 1983), 489. See also Kohlberg's essays on moral development in Vol. I, *The Philosophy of Moral Development* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) and Vol. II, *The Psychology of Moral Development* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984). Kohlberg is only one of many scholars to postulate stages of moral development. For a summary of some of the most significant research in this area, see James R. Rest, *Moral Development: Advances in Research and Theory* (New York: Praeger, 1986).

⁵ One of Kohlberg's critics is Carol Gilligan who argues that because women generally are more sensitive to the needs of others and more naturally oriented to taking care of others than are men, their moral development and moral values are in some ways different from those of men and, because of this, they have often been judged unfairly by men as being morally inferior. Citing a number of studies, including Kohlberg's, Gilligan notes, "The repeated finding of these studies is that qualities deemed necessary for adulthood—the capacity for autonomous thinking, clear decision-making, and responsible action—are those associated with masculinity and considered undesirable as attributes of the feminine self. The stereotypes suggest a splitting of love and work that relegates expressive capacities to women while placing instrumental abilities in the masculine domain." (*In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982], 17.) For Kohlberg's response to Gilligan and other critics, see *Moral Stages: A Current Formulation and a Response to Critics* cited in Note 3.

reasoning as a construct for talking about the Church and our relationship to it. In fact, the extent to which Kohlberg's ideas can be expanded to include even more complex levels or kinds of moral reasoning based on gender or cultural conditioning only increases their usefulness and strengthens the proposition that there are many ways to experience the Church.

The scriptures suggest that the Lord recognizes a progressive system of moral development. We are told that we must have milk before meat, that we are to be taught "line upon line, precept upon precept," and that light is added as we are able to live by the light we have (Hebrews 5:12, Isaiah 28:10, D&C 50:24). The contrast between the Mosaic and the Christian laws suggest that entire groups of people may be at different stages of moral development. The Children of Israel were incapable of living the law of faith and therefore were given a lesser law, as Paul states, "to bring [them] unto Christ" (Galatians 3:24). It is generally held that it was because the people of Enoch achieved such a high state of spiritual development as a community that they were translated as a body into heaven.

In his teachings, the Savior recognized differences in moral development in his followers. For example, the parables of the sower, the talents, and the wheat and tares all recognize various stages of readiness to receive and embrace his gospel. In his behavior toward others, the Savior was always willing to accept people at all levels of spiritual development as long as their hearts were right. Even among his chosen Twelve, he recognized a wide spectrum of spiritual readiness to embrace and magnify his teachings.

Levels of Moral Behavior in the Church

One way to understand how moral reasoning operates in a religion like Mormonism is to look at differing attitudes toward a commandment or principle. For purposes of illustration, let us consider the law of tithing in relation to Kohlberg's six stages.

At the first stage, people pay tithing out of fear. They don't want to be punished for not paying tithing. At times one hears people refer to tithing as "fire insurance," taking literally the promise, "He that is tithed shall not be burned at his coming" (D&C 64:23).

At stage two, people pay their tithing to be rewarded. We often hear people at this level tell faith-promoting stories about how paying tithing brought them immediate tangible rewards. Often people at this stage say, "I can't afford not to pay my tithing."

At stage three, people tend to pay tithing to get approval--of their family, bishop, fellow members or the Lord. They pay tithing because of what people would think of them if they didn't pay it. At this stage, bishops get questions like the

following: “My grandfather gave me \$5,000 but he tithed on the money before he gave it to me, so do I have to tithe on it too?”

At stage four, people pay tithing out of practical considerations and for the social good of the Church. They recognize that the Church couldn't function unless they paid their tithing, and they see it as their duty to contribute their share. Saints at stage five pay tithing because they recognize that they have made a covenant to do so, that it is part of their spiritual contract with the Lord. These people generally do not focus on the technical requirements of the law of tithing, but rather are motivated by higher principles. When the Church eliminated budget contributions, one brother in my ward began paying the money he had been giving to budget as additional tithing.

At stage six, the highest stage of moral development, people pay their tithing out of a deep personal commitment to moral principles. They don't pay their tithing out of fear or to get a reward; they pay it because they recognize that in giving this offering in free will and out of love, the progress of the kingdom is enhanced, their brothers and sisters are blessed, and the world is made better. It is not unusual for people so motivated to give more than the specified 10 percent. I know one couple who has given the Church millions of dollars to support the missionary program. They have not kept their wealth for themselves or their family and in fact live modestly. They have always considered the money they have been blessed to make as a stewardship that should be returned to the Lord with interest.

It is important to recognize that members of the Church live at many different levels of moral development or spiritual awareness. However, as I said earlier, most of our Church governance is performed and the majority of our teaching is conducted as if we had not only a common moral ground but a uniform understanding of the doctrines of the Church. Because of this, we tend to expect more of the Church than it can possibly give and also expect a higher level of Christian behavior from some Saints than they can possibly live.

The Character of the Church

Some Mormons tend to regard the Church as if it had a single mind and a single voice. Often, these people think of the organization of the Church in almost anthropomorphic terms. Thus, one hears such statements as: “The Church is sexist,” “The Church is homophobic,” or “The Church is altruistic,” “The Church is supportive.” Each of these statements contains some truth, but none is completely true. What we may be expressing by such statements is that in our experience in the Church (most probably with individual Church leaders) we have encountered people who are sexist, homophobic, altruistic, or supportive.

This isn't to say that there aren't dominant attitudes and ideas that shape the essential character of the Church; it is to say that when speaking of the Church

one should keep in mind that the Church includes all of us who have taken upon ourselves the name of Jesus Christ and given our allegiance to his restored gospel. The Church includes the limitations, weaknesses, and prejudices as well as the faith, hope, and charity of all of us who call ourselves Mormon, from the apostles and prophets in Salt Lake City to the latest converts in New Guinea, Nigeria, and the Ukraine. Along with our fellow Christians in other churches, we are members of the body of Christ. We all constitute that phenomenon known as his kingdom, and therefore we must be careful in ascribing to the church over-simplistic characteristics or seeing it in terms of our own or someone else's invariably limited point of view. We may also tend to think of church leadership as if it consisted of a unanimous, always harmonious entity. It is not uncommon, especially in certain quarters, to hear people make such statements as: "The Brethren wouldn't like that," or "The Brethren have said...." as if all of the general authorities were in agreement on all issues. Even a casual reading of Church history suggests that this isn't the case, nor should we expect or even want it to be so. Except for doctrinal pronouncements, no one person speaks for the Church, and even in these matters there are sometimes dissenting opinions. The Brethren present matters before the Church as a unified body, but this doesn't mean that every one of them personally agrees with what is said.

The spiritual evolution of the Church depends to some extent on the diversity of lifestyles, cultural backgrounds, and social experiences of its members as well as the openness of all members to the possibilities of revelation through the many sources which the Lord has shown he is willing to make his will known. Since we believe that the Lord will "yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to" his kingdom, we need to prepare our hearts and our minds for what changes these revelations may portend for the Church.

Forgiving the Church and One Another

While Kohlberg's paradigm of moral development focuses on individuals, I believe it can be usefully applied to organizations as well. If the Church is one of the earthly embodiments of the kingdom of God, then, like God's people and the earth itself, it too must be renewed and receive its celestial glory. Participating in the spiritual evolution of the Church is one of our most sacred callings, as individuals and as the body of Christ.

Because the Church cannot possibly be all things to all people, it will at times in its policies and practices be hurtful to some. The idealist who wishes the Church to be an active agent for change based on the social and political realities in the United States and Europe will surely be disappointed. The realist, who may be more aware of the implications of social change for an international church, may be grateful for the degree to which the Church responds to social issues at all. Institutions are at best cumbersome and inefficient instruments of human progress. Most of us would probably subscribe to the oft-quoted dictum "That

government is best which governs least,”⁶ and we would also probably applaud Thoreau’s improvement, “That government is best which governs not at all.”⁷ Nevertheless, in our more sober moments, we would agree that in spite of their limitations, organizations and institutions can do much good.

Those of us who belong to the Church should keep in mind that as part of the kingdom of God on earth, it is an institution with a special destiny. In giving our allegiance to it, we pledge to commit our lives to making it as true a reflection as possible of the heavenly kingdom. Our vision of its possibilities has to include the whole earth, including Africa, South America, and Asia--those places where the highest priority may be getting enough to eat. That means that we all have to work to make the Church a more responsive, more effective, and more charitable institution. We also need to forgive it when it fails to meet all our expectations and needs.

It helps to consider Kohlberg’s perspective in relation to Church leadership. We tend to regard Church leaders as if they always lived at the highest stages of morality. Actually, Church leaders, like the rest of us, live at varying stages of moral development. While they often respond from Kohlberg’s more advanced stages of moral development, at times bishops, stake presidents, mission presidents, regional representatives, and even general authorities respond from lower ones. They will on occasion act out of a moral perspective that seems unenlightened or without charity. Such motivations as practicality and securing the greatest good for the greatest number, Kohlberg’s stage four, have to figure frequently in their decisions.

The Church has undergone spiritual transformation from its beginning. I believe that the Church is less racist today than it was a decade ago. I also believe that there is a diminishing sexism in the Church. There is clearly less emphasis now on literal and legalistic aspects of Church governance, and there seems to be more emphasis on being a good church rather than being the one and only true church. I hope there is more emphasis on being Christian than being merely Mormon. But there are other ways in which the Church needs to grow and change. Women need to have a yet greater voice in the Church, a greater sense of their true equality before God and his priesthood leaders, and an enlarged hope not only that there is a place for them in the Church but a place for the Church in them. Our diverse and under-represented populations need to be empowered by the Church to play a central role in its divine mission, to have their cultural traditions honored on an equal basis with the dominant Eurocentric tradition that has shaped the Church to the present. Alternative visions need also to be given voice and alternative voices given opportunities to shape the visions of the Church’s future. A tendency to

⁶ Although ascribed to both Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine, this sentiment was first expressed by John O. Sullivan in his Introduction to *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* (1837).

⁷ Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience” (1849).

silence these voices—feminine, diverse, and intellectual—does not serve the Church or its ultimate mission well. Being more open to these voices is perhaps one of the ways in which the contemporary Church can evolve to a higher spiritual plane.

Loving the Saints

One of the dangers for those who are at any but the highest levels of spiritual awareness is that they tend to expect everyone to conform to their standards. Those at the highest levels have the charity and magnanimity to accept people where they are and to help them to grow spiritually. The following Zen story about fixed and open rules of morality illustrates the danger of judging others by our own standards of morality.

Tanzan and Ekido were once travelling together down a muddy road. A heavy rain was falling. Coming around a bend, they met a lovely young woman in a silk kimono and sash who was unable to cross the road. “Come on,” said Tanzan at once. Lifting her in his arms, he carried her over the mud and set her down on the other side. He and his companion set off down the road again. Ekido did not speak to his companion again until that night when they reached their lodging temple. Then he could no longer contain himself. “We monks do not go near females,” he told Tanzan, “especially young and lovely ones. It is dangerous. Why did you do that?” “I left the girl there by the side of the road,” replied Tanzan. “Are you still carrying her?”⁸

Recognizing that people don’t fall neatly into Kohlberg’s categories should make us more tolerant. We are all on a continuum in our eternal progression, and God is present at every level. In reality, none of us ever acts consistently with moral maturity. With our families, in our business dealings, or even while stuck in traffic, we may regress all the way back to stage one. On the other hand, we may also occasionally stretch ourselves to reach stage six. Thus, we need to be open to what we can learn from others whose spiritual development may be as uneven as our own. As Emerson said, “I have never met another person who was not my superior in some particular.”

In his humorous sketch, “Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven,” Mark Twain satirizes those who think that they are the elect of God and will be given a special place in heaven. When they arrive there they are surprised to find that the order of things is not what they expected. In the heavenly procession, Adam must walk behind Shakespeare, but both “have to walk behind a common tailor from Tennessee;...and behind a horse-doctor named Sakka, from Afghanistan;...next come Ezekiel, and Mahomet, Zoroaster, and a knife-grinder from ancient Egypt.”

⁸ Kees Bolle, “The Buddhist Revolt Against Fixed Ideas,” *History of Religions Newsletter* (published by the UCLA Department of History) 3:2 (Fall 1975), 12.

When Captain Stormfield asks, “But why did they throw off on Shakespeare, that way, and put him away down there below those shoe makers and horsedoctors and knifegrinders—a lot of people nobody ever heard of?” his companion responds, “That is the heavenly justice of it—they warn’t rewarded according to their just deserts, on earth, but here they get their rightful rank.”⁹

A similar point is made by Flannery O’Connor in her short story, “Revelation.” The main character of the story, Ruby Turpin, sees herself as superior to almost everyone, but especially blacks and “poor white trash.” She continually thanks God for not making her like them: “Her heart rose. He had not made her a nigger or white-trash or ugly! He had made her herself and given her a little of everything. Jesus, thank you! she said. Thank you thank you thank you!” After being literally struck between the eyes with the truth of her own character and later shouting at God, “Who do you think you are?” Ruby Turpin is shown a vision of heaven, a place where she had always seen herself as being elevated above those on whom she has looked down:

A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak [of light] as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud [her husband] had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right.

The ultimate revelation to Mrs. Turpin is not that she is placed behind those to whom she felt superior on earth, but that in spite of her pride, her hypocrisy, and her confused values, Christ will redeem her, too. In her vision she sees that in the redemptive process the “virtues” of people like her were burned away. The last sound she hears are “the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry fields and shouting hallelujah.”¹⁰

For the first six months I was a bishop, I worried a great deal about inconsistency in dealing with transgression. Then I realized that it was impossible to be both consistent and charitable and decided to try to be consistently charitable--to treat each individual not according to strict policies but with understanding and love for his or her unique situation.

⁹ Mark Twain, Extract from *Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven* (New York: Harper & Row, 1909), 86, 87.

¹⁰ Flannery O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 497, 508.

No one of us is ever in a position to completely know the heart of another. This truth has become increasingly evident to me as I have counseled with hundreds of Church members over the past five years. I have come to recognize that there is an entire category of people who have been physically, psychologically, ecclesiastically and sexually abused and who because of this often have an impaired sense of moral reasoning or an impaired ability to live certain commandments. Others, through trauma, tragedy, or even rigid upbringing, may be unable to develop into morally responsible adults.

One story will illustrate my point. Two years ago an attractive woman moved into our ward. She dressed and carried herself in a provocative manner. She attracted men quickly and was openly flirtatious, even with me. Through a series of interviews her troubled history unfolded. I discovered that she had been born out of wedlock, abandoned by her mother at an early age, sexually abused by a grandfather and uncle while still a toddler (the discovery of this came only after peeling away layers of repressed memories in therapy as an adult). She was taken into several foster homes in which sexual abuse continued. She was promiscuous in her teens. She was taken in by an LDS family where the father made sexual advances toward her. Yet when she was twenty-one, she served a successful mission. One would have thought that her life had changed completely. Following her mission she became engaged to a fellow missionary with whom she later became intimate. Her self-esteem crumbled and the engagement was broken. Six months later she was working as a prostitute in Los Angeles.

This woman was given a new beginning when she began to work with a psychotherapist. It was clear that it would be very difficult to overcome the burden of such an abusive and troubled past. Through long hours of counseling with me and with her therapist, loving attention from home and visiting teachers, financial assistance, and various other forms of fellowship, we supported her efforts to break the pattern of her desperate and self-destructive need for male attention. After some time, she made a carefully planned move to be near her mother in another state. Unfortunately, I learned recently that she was back in Los Angeles working as an escort for rich businessmen. While she was in our ward, this sister was the subject of criticism by other ward members who only saw the surface of her behavior. Being aware of her history, I knew it was completely unjust to judge this woman by normal standards of morality, and yet I couldn't betray her confidence by telling others why she should be treated with greater patience and charity.

Every Sunday as I look out over the congregation during sacrament meeting, I am aware of the pain, the sorrow, the suffering behind the faces I see. While some members of my congregation would be comfortable citizens of the City of Enoch, others are only steps away from suicide or serious transgression. While some have what seems to be unlimited freedom in determining their destinies, others have been deprived of their agency or have squandered it to such an extent that significant choice seems impossible.

For most of us, saintly behavior is not a steady state, but something we rise to on occasion. Our behavior is inconsistent as we fluctuate among the various levels of moral conduct. At one moment we may respond with Christ-like compassion to a stranger in need and the next be cruel to a spouse or child. We may be generous in paying tithes and offerings and yet turn away a hungry beggar. The fact that our spirituality is neither constant nor ever increasing in its intensity should leave us humble in regard to our own ability to abide by ideal standards, and it should make us tolerant of others who fail to meet our expectations.

There is a tendency in the Church to judge one another for failure to understand the gospel as we understand it or to abide by the commandments as we do. In every ward there are those who speak disparagingly of others, who question the spiritual devotion and commitment of their brothers and sisters. Sometimes intolerance divides a ward along generational, ideological, or political lines.

I confess that at times I tend to get caught up in such polarization, to see myself on the side of truth, wisdom, and good taste, and to be critical of those whose ideas, opinions, and tastes differ from my own. I can be especially intolerant of those who attack my ideas or lifestyle. What helps me is to remember how accepting, forgiving, and long-suffering the Lord is with me. He doesn't reject me because of my ignorance or sinfulness, or condemn me for my limitations and shortcomings. Instead, he stands ready always to forgive me, to urge me to higher standards of ethical and moral behavior, and to be patient with me as I struggle to reach them. We should try to accept others as God accepts us for whatever we are, wherever we are. His grace on our behalf is always beyond our deserving. As Paul says to the Romans, "God's act of grace is out of all proportion to Adam's wrongdoing. . . . [W]here sin was multiplied [through us], grace immeasurably exceeded it. . . ." (Romans 5:15, 20, Revised English Bible,¹¹ hereafter cited as REB). It is in Romans where Paul gives his strongest argument about the importance of the Saints having tolerance and charity for one another. To those who may make judgments about others in regard to living the Word of Wisdom, he says, "Accept anyone who is weak in faith without debate about his misgivings. For instance, one person may have faith strong enough to eat all kinds of food, while another who is weaker eats only vegetables. Those who eat meat must not look down on those who do not, and those who do not eat meat must not pass judgment on those who do; for God has accepted them" (Romans 14:1-3, REB).

Disputations about the Sabbath day are seen in the same light: "Again, some make a distinction between this day and that; others regard all days alike. Everyone must act on his own convictions. Those who honour the day honour the Lord, and those who eat meat also honour the Lord, since when they eat they give thanks to

¹¹ *The Revised English Bible* (Oxford, Great Britain: Oxford and Cambridge University Press, 1989).

God; and those who abstain have the Lord in mind when abstaining, since they too give thanks to God. For none of us lives, and equally none of us dies, for himself alone....Let us therefore cease judging one another....Let us, then, pursue the things that make for peace and build up the common life.” (Romans 14:5-7, 13, 19, REB.) Building that common life is our common stewardship, and when we take it seriously, we progress as individuals and as a Church.

Spiritual Evolution

M. Scott Peck defines spiritual growth as the evolution of consciousness. He describes the movement from undeveloped spirituality to spiritual competence as spiritual evolution. He also says that this evolution is anti-entropic. Further, Peck states that the force that drives this spiritual evolution is love:

It is through love that we elevate ourselves. And it is through our love of others that we assist others to elevate themselves. Love, the extension of the self, is the very act of evolution. It is evolution in progress. The evolutionary force, present in all life, manifests itself in mankind as human love. Among humanity love is the miraculous force that defies the natural law of entropy.¹²

Peck argues that love comes from grace. He says, “To explain the miracle of grace...we hypothesize the existence of a God who wants us to grow, a God who loves US.”¹³ Mormons who have read *The Road Less Travelled* undoubtedly have been astonished to discover what Peck has to say about the ultimate end of spiritual evolution. He is the only other believer I know who seems to understand that the purpose of our mortal existence is to evolve toward godhood. He says,

Why does God want us to grow? What are we growing toward? What is the end point? The goal of evolution? What is it that God wants of us? All of us who postulate a loving God eventually come to a single terrifying idea: God wants us to become Himself or Herself or Itself. We are growing toward Godhood. God is the goal of evolution. It is God who is the source of the evolutionary process and God who is the destination.¹⁴

Conclusion

I believe that the Church is evolving through the stages of moral development because we as its constituent parts are so evolving. It is a loving God’s divine

¹² Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 268.

¹³ Peck, 269.

¹⁴ Peck, 269-70.

design that his people and his Church arrive at a point where they and it will be renewed with paradisiacal glory.

I am convinced that the purpose of the Church is to make it possible for us to have three central experiences, all of which are designed by loving heavenly parents to help us move to higher planes of spiritual evolution.

The primary purpose of the Church is to make it possible for us to experience the love of God. Ideally, all of the Church's programs and activities should reflect this purpose. Perhaps locked in our deepest pre-existent memories is a remembrance of what it felt like to be held in the loving embrace of our Father and Mother in Heaven. I am convinced that that was the purest experience we have ever felt, an experience so profound and so joyful that when we are in touch with it, we are motivated to spend our entire lives trying to get back into their presence so that we might feel that love, both physically and spiritually, for eternity.

The next purpose of the Church is to help us love ourselves. This is not merely a wish on the Lord's part, but one of his great commandments. He has revealed the gospel and the design of his Church and kingdom so that we will truly know that we are unique, eternal creatures begotten out of love and of inestimable worth to those who begot us and to their Son who gave his life that we might return to their presence.

Being able to love ourselves makes it possible for us to love others and to receive their love, which is the third central purpose of the Church. Notice how much of the gospel is focused on the commandment that we love one another. It is very difficult for people to feel the love of God if they have not first experienced the love of other human beings. Those who doubt the love of God generally are those who doubt the love of their parents and others, who on some deep level are convinced that they are unlovable. In reality, we can't accept the Atonement until we are able to love those who, like ourselves, are undeserving of Christ's love. It is through loving others that we participate with God in the redemption of his children, and it is in being loved by others that we receive the power to seek redemption. For there can be no redemption without love--not just God's love, but the love we give to and receive from others.

When as individuals or as a church we fail to manifest these central purposes, as sometimes happens, it frustrates the work of God. We are called of God to help make the Church fulfill its central mission of making love possible in all its heavenly and earthly manifestations.

I used to think that in order to get to the celestial kingdom I had to keep all of the commandments. I now believe that I need to live as perfectly as possible one commandment--the commandment to love. Further, I believe that those who enter that kingdom will do so because, having learned to love purely, they alone will be

comfortable in the presence of the pure love of God. Others who have loved less completely and less purely will seek lower kingdoms.

I believe that the celestial kingdom is reserved for those who have learned to love themselves, others, and God; the terrestrial kingdom for those who have learned to love themselves and others; and the telestial kingdom for those who chose to love only themselves. The love of the first will be as bright and as warm as the sun, while the love of the second and third will be comparable, respectively, to the light and warmth of the moon and stars. Outer darkness is reserved for those who, in spite of all the opportunities given them in mortality, are unable to give or receive love of any kind. As Father Zosima says in *The Brothers Karamazov*, "Fathers and teachers, I ponder 'What is hell?' I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love."¹⁵ Thus outer darkness is merely the reflection of inner darkness, the heart of darkness in which there is no love and therefore no light.

As we learn to love we move through the stages of our divine lives, from the beginning where our love is focused on ourselves, to loving those who love us, to loving God. And when we learn to love God, our capacity to love is extended to our enemies, to the unlovely, to those whom we do not know but for whom we feel compassion because they belong to the human family, to the world itself and all its creatures and living things, and ultimately to the vastness of space with all of its stars and galaxies and other worlds---because all are part of the handiwork and the habitation of those who begot us in love, who now nurture us in love, and who will welcome us home and crown us as exalted beings through that same love.

¹⁵ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Macmillan, 1951).