

Millet, Robert L., “The Natural Man: An Enemy to God” in *A Book of Mormon Treasury: Gospel Insights from General Authorities and Religious Educators*, (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2003), 203–22.

## **The Natural Man: An Enemy to God**

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President Ezra Taft Benson observed: “Just as a man does not really desire food until he is hungry, so he does not desire salvation of Christ until he knows why he needs Christ. No one adequately and properly knows why he needs Christ until he understands and accepts the doctrine of the Fall and its effect upon all mankind. And no other book in the world explains this vital doctrine nearly as well as the Book of Mormon.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Indeed, serious and careful study of the Fall in the Book of Mormon can drive people to their knees, bringing them to acknowledge their own weaknesses and thus their need for the Lord’s redemption. The Atonement is necessary because of the Fall, and unless people sense the effects of Eden—both cosmically and personally—they cannot comprehend the impact of Gethsemane and Calvary. In this article I will attend primarily to a doctrinal message about humanity that was delivered to King Benjamin by an angel of God. At the same time, I will consider related passages in the Book of Mormon that bear upon and amplify this timeless truth—that the natural man is an enemy to God and a foe to all righteousness.

I am indebted to my colleague, H. Curtis Wright, emeritus professor of library science at Brigham Young University, for his assistance with many of the concepts developed in this paper. Throughout I use the scriptural phrase “natural man” to refer to both men and women.

## **The Setting**

Benjamin the prophet-king had warred a good warfare, had finished his course, and was prepared to render an accounting of his earthly stewardship to his people and to God. In the strength of God, he had led his people to victory over their enemies. In the company of holy and just men, he had confounded false prophets and teachers, spoken the word of truth with power and authority, perpetuated the record of Nephi, and established peace in the land of Zarahemla (see Omni 1:25; Words of Mormon 1:12–18). His garments were clean, and his conscience was void of offense.

King Benjamin called his oldest son, Mosiah, to succeed him and asked him to summon the people to a large conference at the temple (1) to announce his retirement and the appointment of Mosiah to serve in his stead, (2) to account to his people concerning his reign and ministry, and (3) to give to them a name, “that thereby they may be distinguished above all the people which the Lord God hath brought out of the land of Jerusalem; . . . a name that never shall be blotted out, except it be through transgression” (Mosiah 1:11–12). His sermon, contained in Mosiah 2, is one of the most eloquent and profound in all of holy writ, a timely treatise not for slothful servants, but a dispensation of the “mysteries of God” (Mosiah 2:9) to some of the most “diligent people” whom God had led out of Jerusalem (Mosiah 1:11). It is also a timeless message to those in any age who have kept the commandments of God or who strive to do so. It points the way to the Master by unfolding in plainness and clarity the doctrines of the Fall of man and the Atonement of Christ. It sets forth the proper foundation—a theological foundation—for service, for Christian compassion, and for kindness so that human works become the Lord’s works—enduring testimonies of that Lord whose they are.

## **The Doctrine of the Fall**

The gospel or plan of salvation is designed, according to President Brigham Young, for “the redemption of fallen beings.”<sup>[2]</sup> The existence of a plan of deliverance indicates that there must be something from which we need to be delivered. This is a hard doctrine, one that strikes at the heart of man-made religions and suggests the need for revealed religion. People too often attempt to temper the doctrine of the Fall, to soften its effects. Yet the Fall is a companion doctrine to the Atonement. In fact, there are no serious or extended treatments of the Atonement in the Book of Mormon that are not somehow connected, either directly or by obvious implication with the Fall.

We know that because Adam and Eve transgressed by partaking of the forbidden fruit they were cast from the Garden of Eden and from the presence of the Lord, which is spiritual death. As a result came blood, sweat, toil, opposition, bodily decay, and finally physical death. Elder Orson F. Whitney taught that the Fall was “a step forward—a

<sup>[3]</sup>

step in the eternal arch of human progress.”

Even though the Fall was a vital part of the great plan of the Eternal God—as much a foreordained act as Christ’s intercession—our state, including our relationship to and contact with God, changed dramatically. Early in the Nephite record, Lehi “spake concerning the prophets, how great a number had testified of . . . [the] Redeemer of the world. Wherefore, all mankind were in a lost and in a fallen state, and ever would be save they should rely on this Redeemer” (1 Nephi 10:5–6). Again, the coming of the Messiah presupposes the need for redemption.

Joseph Smith wrote to John Wentworth, “We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam’s transgression” (Articles of Faith 1:2). The Lord affirms this proclamation in His statement to Adam: “I have forgiven thee thy transgression in the Garden of Eden” (Moses 6:53). This declaration must, however, be understood in the proper doctrinal context. Although God forgave our first parents their transgression, although there is no original sin entailed upon Adam and Eve’s children, and although “the Son of God hath atoned for original guilt, wherein the sins of the parents cannot be answered upon the heads of the children” (Moses 6:54), we must not conclude that all is well.

To say that we are not condemned by the Fall of Adam is not to say that we are unaffected by it. Jehovah explained to Adam, “Inasmuch as thy children are conceived in sin, even so when they begin to grow up, sin conceiveth in their hearts, and they taste the bitter, that they may know to prize the good” (Moses 6:55). We do not believe, with Calvin, in the moral depravity of humanity. We do not believe, with Luther, that human beings, because of intrinsic carnality and depravity, do not even have the power to choose good over evil. And we do not believe that children are born in sin, that they inherit the so-called sin of Adam, either by sexual union or by birth. Rather, children are *conceived* in sin, meaning first, that they are conceived into a world of sin, and second, that conception is the vehicle by which the *effects* of the Fall (not the original guilt, which God has forgiven) are transmitted to Adam and Eve’s posterity. To be sure, there is no sin in sexual union within the bonds of marriage, nor is conception itself sinful. Rather, through conception the flesh originates; through the process of becoming mortal one inherits the effects of the fall of Adam—both physical and spiritual.

To say that we are not punished for the transgression of Adam is not to say that we are not subject to or affected by it. In fact, Lehi taught Jacob that in the beginning God “gave commandment that all men must repent; for he showed unto all men that they were lost, because of the transgression of their parents” (2 Nephi 2:21; see also Alma 22:14). Thus we all need to repent, since we all have the propensity to sin because we inherited Adam and Eve’s fallen nature. “We know that thou art holy,” the brother of Jared confessed to the Almighty, “and dwellest in the heavens, and that we are unworthy before thee; *because of the fall our natures have become evil continually*; nevertheless, O Lord, thou hast given us a commandment that we must call upon thee, that from thee we may receive according to our desires” (Ether 3:2; emphasis added).

Again, conception, which clothes us in the flesh, is the mechanism of transmission, the means by which Adam and Eve’s fallen nature (both physical and spiritual death) is transferred from generation to generation. The propensity for and susceptibility to sin are implanted in our nature at conception, just as death is. Both death and sin are present only as potentialities at conception, and therefore neither is fully evident at birth. Death and sin do, however, become actual parts of our nature as we grow up. Sin comes spontaneously, just as death does. In the case of little children, the results of this fallen nature (sinful actions and dispositions) are held in abeyance by virtue of the Atonement until they reach the age of accountability. When children reach the age of accountability, however, they become subject to spiritual death and must thereafter repent and come unto Christ by covenant and through the ordinances of the gospel.

The teachings of modern apostles and prophets confirm the testimony of ancient Book of Mormon prophets. Elder Bruce R. McConkie summarized the effects of the Fall as follows:

“Adam fell. We know that this fall came because of transgression, and that Adam broke the law of God, became mortal, and was thus subject to sin and disease and all the ills of mortality. We know that the effects of his fall passed upon all his posterity; *all inherited a fallen state*, a state of mortality, a state in which spiritual and temporal death prevail. In this state all men sin. *All are lost. All are fallen.* All are cut off from the presence of God. . . . Such a way of life is inherent in this mortal existence. . . .

“Death entered the world by means of Adam’s fall—death of two kinds, temporal and spiritual. Temporal death passes upon all men when they depart this mortal life. It is then that the eternal spirit steps out of its earthly tenement, to take up an abode in a realm where spirits are assigned, to await the day of their resurrection. *Spiritual death passes upon all men when they become accountable for their sins. Being thus subject to sin they die spiritually*; they die as pertaining to the things of the Spirit; they die as pertaining to the things of righteousness; they are cast out of the presence of God.

It is of such men that the scriptures speak when they say that the natural man is an enemy to God.”<sup>[4]</sup>

“I have learned in my travels,” the Prophet Joseph Smith observed, “that man is treacherous and selfish, but few

excepted.”<sup>[5]</sup> “Men have been ever prone to apostacy,” President John Taylor pointed out. “Our fallen nature is at enmity with a godly life.”<sup>[6]</sup>

## The Natural Man

In setting forth the doctrine of atonement, King Benjamin taught the lesson that is the focus of this paper: “The natural man is an enemy to God,” he said, “and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord” (Mosiah 3:19). What is King Benjamin saying about humanity? What is the natural man, and how may he be characterized?

Simply stated, natural men and women are unregenerated beings who remain in their fallen condition, living without God and godliness in the world. They are unredeemed creatures without comfort, beings who live by their own light. On the one hand, natural men and women may be people bent on lechery and lasciviousness; they may love Satan more than God, and therefore they are “carnal, sensual, and devilish” (Moses 5:13). After having preached to and pleaded with his son Corianton, and after having taught him that “wickedness never was happiness,” (Alma 41:10), Alma said, “And now, my son, all men that are in a state of nature, or I would say, in a carnal state, are in the gall of bitterness and in the bonds of iniquity.” Now note how such persons are enemies to God: “They are without God in the world, and they have gone contrary to the nature of God; therefore, they are in a state contrary to the nature of happiness” (Alma 41:11).

In the same vein, Abinadi warned the priests of Noah of that day wherein natural men and women—in this case the vile and wicked— would receive their just rewards:

“And then shall the wicked be cast out, and they shall have cause to howl, and weep, and wail, and gnash their teeth; and this because they would not hearken unto the voice of the Lord; therefore the Lord redeemeth them not.

“For they are carnal and devilish, and the devil has power over them; yea, even that old serpent that did beguile our first parents, which was the cause of their fall” (Mosiah 16:2–3).

And then Abinadi explained how the Fall opened the way for people to reject the Spirit and choose sin: “Which [Fall] was the cause of all mankind becoming carnal, sensual, devilish, knowing evil from good, subjecting themselves to the devil. Thus all mankind were lost; and behold, they would have been endlessly lost were it not that God redeemed his people from their lost and fallen state” (Mosiah 16:3–4).

At this point we might be prone to sit back, let out a sigh of relief, and offer gratitude to God that because of the atoning work of Christ, the battle is over. But Abinadi continued his warning: “But remember that he that persists in his own carnal nature, and goes on in the ways of sin and rebellion against God, remaineth in his fallen state and the devil hath all power over him. Therefore he is as though there was no redemption made, being an enemy to God; and also is the devil an enemy to God” (Mosiah 16:5). Sons of perdition experience this exclusion to its fullest at the time of the Judgment, while all others except celestial candidates will experience much of it. We should here attend carefully to the fact that the phrase “persists in his own carnal nature” implies that individuals, in spite of the Atonement, have such a nature in which to persist. Further, “*remaineth* in his fallen state” does not simply mean *get into* a fallen state through sin. It is true that the scriptures affirm that one becomes “carnal, sensual, and devilish” through loving Satan more than God, through willful disobedience to the commandments (Moses 5:13; 6:49; emphasis added). But to be a fallen being is not necessarily to be a carnal, sensual, and devilish being. One becomes fallen by coming into mortality; a fallen person becomes carnal, sensual, and devilish by defying the truth and sinning against it.

On the other hand, natural men and women need not be what we would call degenerate. They may well be moral and upright men and women, bent upon goodness and benevolence. However, they operate in and are acclimated to the present fallen world. Such persons do not enjoy the enlivening powers of the Holy Ghost: they have not received the revealed witness of the truth, and they have not enjoyed the sanctifying powers of the blood of Christ. Although their behavior is proper and appropriate according to societal standards, these natural men and women have not hearkened sufficiently to the Light of Christ to be led to the covenant gospel (see Mosiah 16:2; see also D&C 84:45–48). “The whole world lieth in sin,” the Savior declared in a modern revelation, “and groaneth under darkness and under the bondage of sin.

“And by this you may know they are under the bondage of sin, because they come not unto me” (D&C 84:49–50).

More specifically, with regard to those outside the restored gospel, the Lord states: “There are none that doeth good except those who are ready to receive the fulness of my gospel, which I have sent forth unto this generation”

(D&C 35:12).

And what of the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? Are any of us natural men or women? We certainly qualify for that title if we are guilty of gross wickedness, if we have sinned against gospel light and have not thoroughly repented. And yes, we are relatively guilty too if we persist in a nature which leads us to exist in twilight when we might bask in the light of the Son. In 1867 President Brigham Young declared to the people of the Church: “There is no doubt, if a person lives according to the revelations given to God’s people, he may have the Spirit of the Lord to signify to him His will, and to guide and to direct him in the discharge of his duties, in his temporal as well as his spiritual exercises. I am satisfied, however, that in this respect, we live far beneath our privileges.”<sup>[7]</sup> Members of the Church who refuse to climb toward greater spiritual heights, who have no inclination to further anchor themselves in the truth, who have become satisfied with their present spiritual state—these are they who are natural men and women, persons generally of goodwill who do not understand that through their smugness and complacency they are aiding and abetting the cause of Satan. “Fallen man,” C. S. Lewis perceptively observed, “is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms.”<sup>[8]</sup>

What are some broad characteristics of natural men and women? Consider the following:

1. *They are unable or unwilling to perceive spiritual realities.* Paul explained that “the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14). In exulting over the Lord’s infinite mercy—His willingness to snatch His children from evil and forgive their sins—Ammon said: “What natural man is there that knoweth these things? I say unto you, there is none that knoweth these things, save it be the penitent” (Alma 26:21). Similarly, a modern revelation teaches, “No man has seen God at any time in the flesh, except quickened by the Spirit of God. Neither can any natural man abide the presence of God, neither after the carnal mind” (D&C 67:11–12; see also Moses 1:11).

“How difficult it is to teach the natural man,” Brigham Young declared, “who comprehends nothing more than that which he sees with the natural eye!” President Young went on to say: “How hard it is for him to believe! How difficult would be the task to make the philosopher, who, for many years, has argued himself into the belief that his spirit is no more after his body sleeps in the grave, believe that his intelligence came from eternity, and is as eternal, in its nature, as the elements, or as the Gods. Such doctrine by him would be considered vanity and foolishness, it would be entirely beyond his comprehension. It is difficult, indeed, to remove an opinion or belief into which he has argued himself from the mind of the natural man. Talk to him about angels, heavens, God, immortality, and eternal lives, and it is like sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal to his ears; it has no music to him; there is nothing in it that charms his senses, soothes his feelings, attracts his attention, or engages his affections, in the least; to him it is all vanity.”<sup>[9]</sup>

2. *They are fiercely independent.* Joseph Smith taught that “all men are naturally disposed to walk in their own paths as they are pointed out by their own fingers, and are not willing to consider and walk in the path which is pointed out by another, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, although he should be an unerring director, and the Lord his God sent him.”<sup>[10]</sup> Seeking to be independent, natural men and women ironically end up conforming to the trends of the day. Natural men and women, at least those who have “the carnal mind,” are “not subject to the law of God” (Romans 8:7) but rather are subject to their own whims, passions, and desires. C. S. Lewis remarked that “until you have given up yourself to [the Lord] you will not have a real self. Sameness is to be found most among the most ‘natural’ men, not among those who surrender to Christ. How monotonously alike all the great tyrants and conquerors have been: how gloriously different are the saints.”<sup>[11]</sup>

Samuel the Lamanite expressed the tragic end of those whose natural view of reality causes them to spend their days climbing the wrong ladder: “But behold, your days of probation are past; ye have procrastinated the day of your salvation until it is everlastingly too late, and your destruction is made sure; yea, for ye have sought all the days of your lives for that which ye could not obtain; and ye have sought for happiness in doing iniquity, which thing is contrary to the nature of that righteousness which is in our great and Eternal Head” (Helaman 13:38).

In the words of a Protestant counselor: “Fallen man has taken command of his own life, determined above all else to prove that he’s adequate for the job. And like the teen who feels rich until he starts paying for his own car insurance, we remain confident of our ability to manage life until we face the reality of our own soul. . . . To put it simply, people want to run their own lives. Fallen man is both terrified of vulnerability and committed to maintaining independence. . . . The most natural thing for us to do is to develop strategies for finding life that reflect our commitment to depending on our own resources.”<sup>[12]</sup>

3. *They are proud, overly competitive, reactionary, and externally driven.* Natural men and women—be they the irreverent and ungodly or the well-meaning but spiritually unregenerate—are preoccupied with self and obsessed with personal aggrandizement. Their lives are keyed to the rewards of this ephemeral sphere; their values derive solely from pragmatism and utility. They take their cues from the world and the worldly. “The central feature of pride,” as President Ezra Taft Benson warned the Latter-day Saints, “is enmity—enmity toward God and enmity toward our fellowmen.” The look of natural men and women is neither up (to God) nor over (to their fellow humans), except as the horizontal glance allows them to maintain a distance from others. “Pride is essentially competitive in nature,” President Benson explained. “We pit our will against God’s. When we direct our pride toward God, it is in the spirit of ‘my will and not thine be done.’ . . . The proud cannot accept the authority of God giving direction to their lives. . . . The proud wish God would agree with them. They aren’t interested in changing their opinions to agree with God’s.” With regard to other people, the proud “are tempted daily to elevate [themselves] above others and diminish them. . . . In the words of C. S. Lewis: ‘Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man.’” In short, “Pride is the universal sin, the great vice. . . . [It] is the great stumbling block to Zion.”<sup>[13]</sup>

4. *They yield themselves to the harsh and the crude.* The Spirit of the Lord has a calming and quieting influence upon those who cultivate it and enjoy its fruits. As a sanctifier, the Holy Ghost “expands, and purifies all the natural passions and affections. . . . It inspires virtue, kindness, goodness, tenderness, gentleness and charity.”<sup>[14]</sup> On the other hand, as President Spencer W. Kimball declared, the natural man—the person who lives without this divine refinement—“is the ‘earthy man’ who has allowed rude animal passions to overshadow his spiritual inclinations.”<sup>[15]</sup>

### Frequent Reactions to the Doctrine

As I indicated earlier, the doctrine of the natural man is a hard doctrine, one that is not only misunderstood but also frequently denied. Reactions to the idea that the natural man is an enemy to God are numerous. Some of these we will now consider.

1. *We all enjoy the Light of Christ.* One rejoinder to this doctrine is that every person that comes into the world is endowed by God with the Light of Christ. Although it is true that the Light of Christ is a gift and endowment from God, this is a doctrine that requires some explanation, for it is necessary to distinguish between two aspects of the Light of Christ. On the one hand, there is the natural or physical light or law by which the sun, moon, and stars operate—the light by which we see and the means by which human, animal, and plant life abound (see D&C 88:6–13, 50). On the other hand, there is what might be called a redemptive dimension of the Light of Christ, a light that we must receive, a voice to which we must hearken before we are led to the higher light of the Holy Ghost and are thereby redeemed from our fallen state. Because we have our agency, we can choose to accept or reject this light. Whether such redemptive light takes the form of reason or judgment or conscience, we must exercise some degree of faith to enjoy its benefits. Thus, although it is true that the Spirit gives light to all of us, it only spiritually enlightens and redeems those of us who hearken to it (see D&C 84:42–50).

2. *The spirit of humankind is good.* Those who contend that humans are basically good, that their inherent inclination is to choose righteousness, enjoy quoting a statement made by Brigham Young in which he seems to take quite a different view of who and what the natural man is: “It is fully proved in all the revelations that God has ever given to mankind that they naturally love and admire righteousness, justice and truth more than they do evil. It is, however, universally received by professors of religion as a Scriptural doctrine that man is naturally opposed to God. This is not so. Paul says, in his Epistle to the Corinthians, ‘But the natural man receiveth not the things of God,’ but I say it is the unnatural ‘man that receiveth not the things of God.’ . . . That which was, is, and will continue to endure is more natural than that which will pass away and be no more. The natural man is of God.”<sup>[16]</sup> There is no question, in light of the belief in human depravity held by so many in the nineteenth century, that the doctrines of the Restoration were a refreshing breeze in a dry and arid spiritual climate. The revelation that God had forgiven Adam and Eve of their transgression, as well as the corollary principle that little children who die before the time of accountability are saved, served to set the Latter-day Saints apart from much of the Christian world and certainly painted a more positive and optimistic picture of human nature. The scriptures teach that we lived before we came here, that we are all the sons and daughters of God, and that our spirits literally inherited from our exalted Sire the capacity to become like Him (see Abraham 3:22–23; D&C 76, 58–59). These are all true doctrines. When understood they can do much to lift our sights toward the glorious and the ennobling.”

Such beliefs, however, do not invalidate the burden of scripture—there was a fall, and the Fall takes a measured

and meaningful toll upon earth's inhabitants. Obviously President Young used the phrase "natural man" differently from the way that Paul or King Benjamin used it. His reference is to the spirit of man, the willing and striving eternal agent which is a child of God. His point is a good one: human beings can choose good as well as evil and can, through the proper exercise of their God-given agency, stand as spiritual beings before the Almighty. And yet our spirits can be and are influenced by our physical bodies, inasmuch as the latter are subject to our present fallen state. President Brigham Young also taught:

"Now, I want to tell you that [Satan] does not hold any power over man, only so far as the body overcomes the spirit that is in a man, through yielding to the spirit of evil. The spirit that the Lord puts into a tabernacle of flesh, is under the dictation of the Lord Almighty; but the spirit and body are united in order that the spirit may have a tabernacle, and be exalted; and the spirit is influenced by the body, and the body by the spirit.

"In the first place the spirit is pure, and under the special control and influence of the Lord, but the body is of the earth, and is subject to the power of the devil, and is under the mighty influence of that fallen nature that is on the earth.

If the spirit yields to the body, the devil then has power to overcome both the body and spirit of that man."<sup>[17]</sup>

On another occasion, President Young taught that "there are no persons without evil passions to embitter their lives. Mankind are revengeful, passionate, hateful, and devilish in their dispositions. This we inherit through the fall, and the grace of God is designed to enable us to overcome it."<sup>[18]</sup>

3. *Little children are innocent.* Too often, Latter-day Saints become concerned and confused about the scriptural statement that children are conceived in sin (see Moses 6:55) and ask, "Are children pure?" The answer to this question is always a resounding "Yes!" No one disputes that. The real issue is why children are pure. Two possibilities suggest themselves: (1) the Greek or humanistic response is that children are pure because human nature is pure, prone toward the good; while (2) the Christian gospel response is that children are pure because of the Atonement, because Jesus Christ declared them so. To paraphrase the words of Lehi, children are redeemed because of the righteousness of our Redeemer (see 2 Nephi 2:3). Benjamin, declaring the words of the angel, said, "And even if it were possible that little children could sin they could not be saved." That is, if Christ required children to be responsible for those actions or deeds which are ostensibly wrong and sinful, they could not be saved, had there been no atonement. "But I say unto you," Benjamin explains, "they are blessed; for behold, as in Adam, or by nature, they fall, even so the blood of Christ atoneth for their sins" (Mosiah 3:16).

The revelations state that little children "cannot sin, for power is not given unto Satan to tempt little children, until they begin to become accountable before me" (D&C 29:47). All of us know of deeds performed by little children that may only be described as evil. I am aware of a seven-year-old who in an act of rage killed his brother. The act of murder is a heinous sin. But in this case the child's action is not counted as sin. Why? Because, in the words of God, "Little children are redeemed from the foundation of the world through mine Only Begotten" (D&C 29:46). Christ explained that "the curse of Adam is taken from [children] in me, that it hath no power over them" (Moroni 8:8). Little children are subject to the effects of the Fall, just as all of us are; they are not, however, held accountable for their actions. In summary, little children are saved without any preconditions—without faith, repentance, or baptism. Their innocence is decreed and declared by and through the tender mercies of an all-loving Lord. Children are innocent because of the Atonement, not because there is no sin in their nature.

4. *Joseph Smith taught that we are gods in embryo.* Some people believe that Joseph Smith and the Latter-day Saints progressed or evolved beyond the doctrine of the Fall, that the message of the Book of Mormon was later quietly but surely superseded by the purer pronouncements in the King Follett Sermon. To me such views are groundless and misleading. It was in 1841 that the Prophet made his now-famous statement about the correctness and power of the

Book of Mormon.<sup>[19]</sup> Only the night before the Prophet's martyrdom, "Hyrum Smith read and commented upon extracts from the Book of Mormon, on the imprisonments and deliverance of the servants of God for the Gospel's sake. Joseph bore a powerful testimony to the guards of the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon, the restoration of the Gospel, the administration of angels, and that the kingdom of God was again established upon the earth."<sup>[20]</sup> That scene in Carthage certainly bespeaks more than sentimental attachment on the part of the Prophet to the scriptural record—and to the doctrines it put forward—that had come to light through his instrumentality almost two decades earlier. The fact is, on some occasions Joseph Smith spoke of the nobility of humankind, and on some occasions he spoke of the

carnality of humankind.<sup>[21]</sup> To conclude that the Prophet taught only of humankind's nobility—or, for that matter, that

he taught only of humankind's ignobility—is to misrepresent his broader theological view.<sup>[22]</sup>

## Putting off the Natural Man

During his speech at the temple, King Benjamin explained that “men drink damnation to their own souls except they humble themselves and become as little children, and believe that salvation was, and is, and is to come, in and through the atoning blood of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent. “For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father” (Mosiah 3:18–19).

We do not put off the natural man by living longer. We do not change our natures by simply attending meetings and being involved in the work of the Church. The Church is a divine organization. It administers the saving gospel. The transformation from the natural state to the spiritual state, however, is accomplished only through the mediation and Atonement of Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Ghost. No one goes from death to life without that enabling power we call the grace of God. Programs to develop self-control, plans to modify human behavior, and schemes directed toward the shaping of more appropriate actions have fallen and will forever fall far short of the mark which Christ has set. These programs are at best deficient and at worst perverse. In the language of President Ezra Taft Benson: “The Lord works from the inside out. The world works from the outside in. The world would take people out of the slums. Christ takes the slums out of people, and then they take themselves out of the slums. The world would mold men by changing their environment. Christ changes men, who then change their environment. The world would shape human behavior, but Christ can change human nature.”<sup>[23]</sup>

Those who are born again or born from above—who die as to the things of unrighteousness and begin to live again as pertaining to the things of the Spirit—are like little children, clean and pure. Through the atoning blood of Christ they have had their sins remitted and have entered the realm of divine experience. Putting off the natural man involves putting on Christ. As Paul counseled the Saints in his day, those who put off the “old man” are “renewed in the spirit of [their] mind.” They “put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness” (Ephesians 4:22–24), and “which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him” (Colossians 3:10).

This renovation of the natural man may be dramatic and rapid for some. Such was the case with Enos (see Enos 1:1–8) and with the people of King Benjamin who underwent a “mighty change,” such that they had “no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2). It may be like the experiences of Alma the Younger or Paul, both of whom were redirected and reoriented through the ministry of heavenly beings (see Mosiah 27; Alma 36; Acts 9). As to the miraculous conversion of King Lamoni—and thus of the unspeakable power of Christ to forge new creatures—the Nephite record attests: “King Lamoni was under the power of God; [Ammon] knew that the dark veil of unbelief was being cast away from his mind, and the light which did light up his mind, which was the light of the glory of God, which was a marvelous light of his goodness—yea, this light had infused such joy into his soul, the cloud of darkness having been dispelled, and that the light of everlasting life was lit up in his soul, yea, he knew that this had overcome his natural frame, and he was carried away in God” (Alma 19:6).

“But we must be cautious,” President Benson has warned us, “as we discuss these remarkable examples. Though they are real and powerful, they are the exception more than the rule. For every Paul, for every Enos, and for every King Lamoni, there are hundreds and thousands of people who find the process of repentance much more subtle, much more imperceptible. Day by day they move closer to the Lord, little realizing they are building a godlike life.”<sup>[24]</sup>

Those who have put off the natural man—what Paul called the “works of the flesh” (Galatians 5:19)—begin to enjoy what he also called the “fruit of the Spirit,” namely “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance”; they begin to “walk in the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22–23, 25). As King Benjamin explained, they are humble and submissive, eager to know and carry out the will of the Savior, eager to have their own wishes swallowed up in a higher will (see Mosiah 3:19). Surely the highest and grandest fruit of the Spirit is love—what the scriptures call charity, the “pure love of Christ” (Moroni 7:47).

“And again, I remember,” Moroni stated humbly to his Master, “that thou hast said that thou hast loved the world, even unto the laying down of thy life for the world. . . .

“And now I know that this love which thou hast had for the children of men is charity; wherefore, except men shall have charity they cannot inherit that place which thou hast prepared in the mansions of thy Father” (Ether 12:33–34).

This charity is more than an emotion, higher than a sweet feeling, more transcendent than an effort to perform good deeds. It is literally a fruit of the Spirit, a heavenly endowment that can only be granted and bestowed by an all-

loving God. The true followers of Christ come to love as He loves because they have become as He is. In short, they have become saints, members of the household of faith who seek the way of holiness and have enjoyed the sublime sanctifying powers of the Holy Ghost.

## Conclusion

We shall spend all our days seeking to subdue the flesh and put off the natural man; this is the challenge of mortality. “Will sin be perfectly destroyed?” Brigham Young asked. “No, it will not, for it is not so designed in the economy of Heaven. . . . Do not suppose that we shall ever in the flesh be free from temptations to sin. Some suppose that they can in the flesh be sanctified body and spirit and become so pure that they will never again feel the effects of the power of the adversary of truth. Were it possible for a person to attain to this degree of perfection in the flesh, he could not die neither remain in a world where sin predominates. Sin has entered into the world, and death by sin. I think we shall more or less feel the effects of sin so long as we live, and finally have to pass the ordeals of death.”<sup>[25]</sup> Zion is built “in process of time” (Moses 7:21); it is only by patience and long-suffering that the Saints of the Most High become a holy people.

There is great virtue in truth and great power in the proclamation of the truth. President Ezra Taft Benson has repeatedly warned the Saints of the condemnation, scourge, and judgment that rest upon the Church because of our near neglect of the Book of Mormon (see D&C 84:54–61). He has, however, reminded us that the condemnation can be lifted through serious study and consistent application of the teachings and patterns for living provided in that sacred volume. “I am deeply concerned,” he once said, “about what we are doing to teach the Saints at all levels the gospel of Jesus Christ as completely and authoritatively as do the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants. By this I mean teaching the ‘great plan of the Eternal God,’ to use the words of Amulek (Alma 34:9).

“Are we using the messages and the method of teaching found in the Book of Mormon and other scriptures of the Restoration to teach this great plan of the Eternal God? . . .

“The Book of Mormon Saints knew that the plan of redemption must start with the account of the fall of Adam. In the words of Moroni, ‘By Adam came the fall of man. And because of the fall of man came Jesus Christ, . . . and because of Jesus Christ came the redemption of man’ (Mormon 9:12).

“We all need to take a careful inventory of our performance and also the performance of those over whom we preside to be sure that we are teaching the ‘great plan of the Eternal God’ to the Saints.

“Are we accepting and teaching what the revelations tell us about the Creation, Adam and the fall of man, and redemption from that fall through the atonement of Christ?”<sup>[26]</sup>

As stated earlier, just as we do not desire food until we are hungry, so the living waters can bless our lives only to the degree to which we acknowledge our fallen condition, seek diligently to put off the natural man, and receive deliverance from sin through repentance. “It requires all the atonement of Christ,” Brigham Young noted, “the mercy of the Father, the pity of angels and the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to be with us always, and then to do the very best we possibly can, to get rid of this sin within us, so that we may escape from this world into the celestial kingdom.”<sup>[27]</sup>

In the words of C. S. Lewis, the animation and renovation of human character “is precisely what Christianity is about. This world is a great sculptor’s shop. We are the statues and there is a rumor going round the shop that some of us are some day going to come to life.”<sup>[28]</sup> When we do so, as individuals and as a people, to quote a modern prophet, “a new day will break and Zion will be redeemed.”<sup>[29]</sup>

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<sup>[1]</sup> Ezra Taft Benson, *A Witness and a Warning* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 33.

<sup>[2]</sup> Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–97), 1:1; hereafter cited as *JD*.

<sup>[3]</sup> Orson F. Whitney, in Conference Report, April 1908, 90.

<sup>[4]</sup> Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 244, 349–50; emphasis added.

<sup>[5]</sup> Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book,

1976), 30.

[6] John Taylor, *Mediation and Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1892), 197.

[7] Brigham Young, in *JD*, 12:104.

[8] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 59.

[9] Brigham Young, in *JD*, 1:2.

[10] Smith, *Teachings*, 26–27.

[11] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 190.

[12] Larry Crabb, *Inside Out* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), 15–16, 54.

[13] Ezra Taft Benson, “Beware of Pride,” *Ensign*, May 1989, 4, 6.

[14] Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 61.

[15] Spencer W. Kimball, “Ocean Currents and Family Influences,” *Ensign*, November 1974, 112.

[16] Brigham Young, in *JD*, 9:305.

[17] Brigham Young, in *JD*, 2:255–56; see also Smith, *Teachings*, 181, 187, 189, 226.

[18] Brigham Young, in *JD*, 8:160.

[19] See Smith, *Teachings*, 194.

[20] Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 6:600.

[21] For the latter perspective, see Smith, *Teachings*, 26–27, 30, 196, 249, 252, 258, 303, 315, 328.

[22] For a more detailed discussion of this matter, see Robert L. Millet, “Joseph Smith and Modern Mormonism: Orthodoxy, Neoorthodoxy, Tension, and Tradition,” *BYU Studies* 29, no. 3 (summer 1989): 49–68.

[23] Ezra Taft Benson, “Born of God,” *Ensign*, November 1985, 6.

[24] Ezra Taft Benson, “A Mighty Change of Heart,” *Ensign*, October 1989, 2–5.

[25] Brigham Young, in *JD*, 10:173.

[26] Benson, *A Witness and a Warning*, 32–33.

[27] Brigham Young, in *JD*, 11:39.

[28] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 140.

[29] Benson, *A Witness and a Warning*, 66.