

Becoming One with Christ: The Foundation of Ethical Behavior

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Ethical dilemmas are among the toughest problems we face. They involve making difficult decisions about competing choices that frequently need to be resolved quickly in the heat of the moment. For example, many employees find themselves in situations where, to remain loyal to their supervisors and companies, they must decide whether to compromise their integrity by falsifying information. Other dilemmas might involve a choice between justice and mercy or a choice between individual wants versus the needs of the community. All these scenarios involve choices between difficult options, but is there a right answer?

Individuals subscribing to the philosophy of relativism would argue no because they believe that “there are no normative moral principles

whatsoever which are intrinsically valid or universally obliging.”¹ Elder Neal A. Maxwell spoke of the danger of applying relativism to moral reasoning: “Relativism involves the denial of the existence of absolute truths and, therefore, of an absolute truthgiver, God. Relativism has sometimes been a small, satanic sea breeze, but now the winds of relativism have reached gale proportions. Over a period of several decades relativism has eroded ethics, public and personal, has worn down the will of many, has contributed to a slackening sense of duty, civic and personal.”²

There are absolute truths and standards that form the basis for solving ethical dilemmas just as there are known standards of physical properties and measurements that provide a point of reference for the solution of technical problems. When applying a resolution procedure that incorporates these absolute truths and standards, we can find correct answers for every dilemma. President Brigham Young once said:

Brother Heber [Kimball] alluded to counseling men and women who come to him after they had been to me, and said that they always received the same counsel I had given them. I never have known it to fail, that if they come to me and then go to brother Heber, they will get the same counsel all the time. . . . I have no counsel for a man, unless I have the testimony of Jesus on the subject. Then, when the same man asks counsel of me, and goes to brother Heber, do you not see that if he acts on the same principle and gives counsel, it must be by the Spirit of revelation; or he has no counsel to give, if it is not by that Spirit. . . . Every man in the kingdom of God would give the same counsel upon each subject, if he would wait until he had the mind of Christ upon it. Then all would have one word and mind, and each man would see eye to eye.³

1. Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: True or False? A Dialogue between Joseph Fletcher and John Warwick Montgomery* (Minneapolis: Dimension Books, 1972), back cover.
2. Neal A. Maxwell, “Some Thoughts on the Gospel and the Behavioral Sciences,” *Ensign*, July 1976, 70.
3. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 5:100.

This quote suggests there is a correct answer to an ethical dilemma: the answer that Christ would choose.

A Firm Foundation

To resolve difficult dilemmas, the philosophy that forms the foundation of our moral reasoning must reflect deeply held convictions and align with the mind of Christ. If these convictions are based on eternal principles, they will lead us to respond correctly in moments when we need to make difficult choices. A belief system founded upon the character of God, as exemplified in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ, will provide the necessary foundation for our moral reasoning. When convictions are thus founded, individuals will seek to develop the mind of Christ, and their actions will be motivated by a desire to emulate Him and to do as He did. Elder Maxwell taught: “Jesus said He is ‘the way, the truth, and the life.’ (John 14:6.) He has ‘received a fullness of truth.’ (D&C 93:26.) Hence, we are to seek to have the ‘mind of Christ.’ (1 Cor. 2:16.) Furthermore, as to the ‘manner’ of people we are to become, it is clear we are to strive to become even as Jesus is.”⁴ If we do not have the mind of Christ when resolving our ethical dilemmas, we can make mistakes that have serious ramifications.

How do we develop a foundation that will enable us to seek the mind of Christ and to find correct solutions to ethical dilemmas? When faced with an ethical dilemma, we must act out a decision of our choice. The action we choose will be a product of our knowledge and faith that certain outcomes will result. Our faith then becomes a critical ingredient when we are confronted with a dilemma. Will our faith motivate us to correct or incorrect actions? The answer to that question lies largely upon what our faith is based on and how committed we are to that basis. *Lectures on Faith*, a series of seven theological treatises prepared by the Prophet Joseph Smith and others after intense study of the scriptures, helps us understand the principles on which our faith should be based to move us to the correct action.⁵

4. Neal A. Maxwell, “The Inexhaustible Gospel,” *Ensign*, April 1993, 68.

5. Joseph Smith, *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985).

Ronald E. Terry

In Lecture 1, we learn that faith is the moving principle of all action: “If men were duly to consider themselves, and turn their thoughts and reflections to the operations of their own minds, they would readily discover that it is faith, and faith only, which is the moving cause of all action in them.”⁶

Consider the future as those things not seen. We hope that certain things will happen—that the next paycheck will come or that the car will start, and we will be able to drive to our destination. Faith is the assurance of all these things for which we hope (see Hebrews 11:1). We rely on faith to act as if the things for which we have hoped will come to pass. All actions are preceded by this hope and faith. Faith moves us to act toward some end, some purpose that we have as a goal for the future. Lehi, a great Book of Mormon prophet, defined our ultimate purpose when he said, “Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy” (2 Nephi 2:25).

After reviewing the works of many of the world’s great thinkers regarding the supreme goal that most people seek, Dennis F. Rasmussen commented: “Faith prompts them [all intelligent beings] to plan, to prepare, and then to act so as to obtain some purpose or end which lies yet in the future. But what end? . . . There is an ultimate end for which all men naturally search. Its name is happiness.”⁷

Although happiness is what all of us seek, we define this goal differently. The Savior, however, spoke of a strait gate and a narrow way that leads to it (see Matthew 7:13). Most of the wise would agree. Aristotle said that happiness is “an activity of soul in accordance with virtue.”⁸ Aristotle identified two important aspects of happiness. First, an activity is involved; that is, we need to be doing something. Second, the activity needs to be virtuous. Faith, based on virtue, will lead to actions that will lead to happiness. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “Happiness is the object and design of our existence; and will be the end

6. *Lectures on Faith*, 1:10

7. Dennis F. Rasmussen, “What Faith Is,” in *The Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective*, ed. Larry E. Dahl and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1990), 166.

8. Aristotle, as quoted in Rasmussen, “What Faith Is,” 167.

thereof, if we pursue the path that leads to it; and this path is virtue, uprightness, faithfulness, holiness, and keeping all the commandments of God.”⁹ When our faith is based on God, it “can become the very wellspring of purposeful living.”¹⁰ This kind of living will greatly assist us in our ethical decision making.

Consistency between Values and Actions

In Proverbs, we read, “For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7). This suggests that there is an inner source of all our outward actions; that is, everything we do outwardly we first think in our minds or feel in our hearts. C. S. Lewis wrote:

When I come to my evening prayers and try to reckon up the sins of the day, nine times out of ten the most obvious one is some sin against charity; I have sulked or snapped or sneered or snubbed or stormed. And the excuse that immediately springs to my mind is that the provocation was so sudden and unexpected: I was caught off my guard, I had not time to collect myself. Now that may be an extenuating circumstance as regards those particular acts: they would obviously be worse if they had been deliberate and premeditated. On the other hand, surely what a man does when he is taken off his guard is the best evidence for what sort of man he is? Surely what pops out before the man has time to put on a disguise is the truth? If there are rats in a cellar you are most likely to see them if you go in very suddenly. But the suddenness does not create the rats: it only prevents them from hiding. In the same way the suddenness of the provocation does not make me an ill-tempered man: it only shows me what an ill-tempered man I am.¹¹

9. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 255.

10. Gordon B. Hinckley, “With All Thy Getting Get Understanding,” *Ensign*, August 1988, 5.

11. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 192.

Ronald E. Terry

Rasmussen further commented on the relationship between our inner thoughts and our faith: "Faith as the principle of outer action is first of all the principle of inner action that provides the basis for the outward one. This fact needs to be remembered and constantly emphasized in an age such as ours, which tends so much to prize tangible results and observable consequences. The point is not that these are unimportant but that in order to have real worth they must follow from a virtuous inward action of the soul that intended them."¹² Relating this to our goal of happiness, we find that to be truly happy with ourselves, we must have our outer actions consistent with our inner thoughts and feelings. To accomplish this, we frequently make promises with ourselves to do certain things. By analyzing the results of our actions and comparing them with these promises, we can measure the consistency of our inner thoughts and outer actions.

The concept that true happiness comes when our outer actions are consistent with our inner thoughts that are founded upon correct principles is demonstrated in the play *A Man for All Seasons*. Near the end of the play, Thomas More sits in an English prison waiting a day in court and certain beheading. More is in this position because he is unwilling to swear an oath of loyalty to King Henry VIII. Henry asks for this oath because he needs More's support for his wedding to Anne Boleyn, for which the Catholic Church had previously denied permission. More, an intensely religious man possessing great integrity, has sided with the pope on the matter. More's daughter visits him in prison and asks him to swear the oath outwardly to the king but retain the oath inwardly in his heart: "Then say the words of the oath and in your heart think otherwise." More responded, "What is an oath then but words we say to God? . . . When a man takes an oath, Meg, he's holding his own self in his own hands. Like water. And if he opens his fingers *then*—he needn't hope to find himself again. Some men aren't capable of this, but I'd be loathe to think your father one of them."¹³ More believed it was better for a man to remain happy with himself and choose to die than

12. Dennis F. Rasmussen, "What Faith Is," 175.

13. Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 81.

to choose to be inconsistent with his inner thoughts and feelings. When we are living the kind of life that would lead to this inner peace and joy, we will be seeking the mind of Christ; we will be more apt to make correct choices when faced with difficult ethical dilemmas.

Faith in Christ

In Lecture 3 of *Lectures on Faith*, we learn about three keys that will assist us in knowing how we are doing at developing faith in Christ:

Let us here observe, that three things are necessary in order that any rational and intelligent being may exercise faith in God unto life and salvation.

First, the idea that he actually exists.

Secondly, a *correct* idea of his character, perfections, and attributes.

Thirdly, an actual knowledge that the course of life which he is pursuing is according to his will. For without an acquaintance with these three important facts, the faith of every rational being must be imperfect and unproductive; but with this understanding it can become perfect and fruitful, abounding in righteousness, unto the praise and glory of God the Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁴

First, for our faith to be productive and lead us to happiness, our faith should be based on the reality of God's existence. "We here observe that God is the only supreme governor and independent being in whom all fullness and perfection dwell, . . . and he is the object in whom the faith of all other rational and accountable beings center for life and salvation."¹⁵

Second, we need to have a correct understanding of His characteristics and attributes for us to have faith in Him and to learn how to act. "Let us here observe, that the real design which the God of heaven had in view in making the human family acquainted with his attributes, was, that they, through the ideas of the existence of his attributes, might

14. *Lectures on Faith*, 3:2–5.

15. *Lectures on Faith*, 2:2.

Ronald E. Terry

be enabled to exercise faith in him, and, through the exercise of faith in him, might obtain eternal life.”¹⁶

Knowing of His characteristics, it is easier to place our faith in Him when we face challenging, ethical dilemmas. Lectures 3 and 4 in *Lectures on Faith* contain a discussion of God’s characteristics and attributes and help us understand that the scriptures are our greatest resource to learn about His character. The words of the prophets recorded in the scriptures contain many references summarized in the Topical Guide. The prophets have also recorded the life of the Savior, in which He revealed the nature of the Father. The Apostle Paul said that Jesus was “the express image of his [Father’s] person” (Hebrews 1:3). The Savior confirmed this to Philip when He said, “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father” (John 14:9). *Lectures on Faith* contains the following statement concerning the scriptures’ importance to help us learn about the nature of God: “We are indebted to the revelations which he has given to us for a correct understanding of his character, perfections, and attributes; because, without the revelations which he has given to us, no man by searching could find out God.”¹⁷

From our earlier discussion, we know that God would always choose the correct solution when faced with what we may consider a difficult ethical dilemma, because He has developed His character and attributes to perfection. From Lecture 5, we learn that not only has God the Father reached this stage of development, but so have the other members of the Godhead. Elder Bruce R. McConkie said we need to be striving to become one as the members of the Godhead are one: “God has said to all the world, as have his prophets everlastingly and repetitiously, that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are one. He drills this concept into us. They are one in plan, one in purpose, one in power, one in the possession of the attributes of godliness, and one in every good thing. The whole system of salvation is so ordained that we may become one with Deity. If we do not, we are not like him. In declaring that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are one God, the revela-

16. *Lectures on Faith*, 4:2.

17. *Lectures on Faith*, 3:7.

tions are bearing record that we must be one as they are one. We must go from grace to grace until we inherit an eternal fullness.”¹⁸ Not only is the plan of salvation designed for us to become one as the members of the Godhead are one, but also our worship of the Father and the Son is inextricably tied to the process of achieving their attributes, as Elder McConkie further stated: “Come worship the Lord! How is it done? Perfect worship is emulation. We honor those whom we imitate. The most perfect way of worship is to be holy as Jehovah is holy. It is to be pure as Christ is pure. It is to do the things that enable us to become like the Father. The course is one of obedience, of living by every word that proceedeth forth from the mouth of God, of keeping the commandments. How do we worship the Lord? We do it by going from grace to grace, until we receive the fullness of the Father and are glorified in light and truth as is the case with our Pattern and Prototype, the Promised Messiah.”¹⁹

The third key to making our faith productive is knowing that the course of life we are pursuing is according to God’s will. In Lecture 6, we read the following about the importance of knowing if our course in life is agreeable with God:

An actual knowledge to any person, that the course of life which he pursues is according to the will of God, is essentially necessary to enable him to have that confidence in God without which no person can obtain eternal life. It was this that enabled the ancient saints to endure all their afflictions and persecutions, and to take joyfully the spoiling of their goods, knowing (not believing merely) that they had a more enduring substance, . . . not only the spoiling of their goods, and the wasting of their substance, joyfully, but also to suffer death in its most horrid forms; knowing (not merely believing) that when this earthly house of their tabernacle was dissolved, they

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18. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrines of the Restoration: Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie*, ed. Mark L. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 380.
 19. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1978), 568–69.

Ronald E. Terry

had a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.²⁰

Daily Decisions

For our worship and our own confidence in our relationship with God, we need to know if our daily decisions please Him. To know this, we need to be actively trying to acquire godly attributes and to be seeking confirmation of our actions. How does one go about acquiring the characteristics of God? For most of us, this is a lifetime process, one that requires much effort, diligence, and patience. Consider the following steps:

- Study
- Experiment upon the word
- Record, reflect, and assess
- Observe and learn from others
- Serve God
- Pray and ask of God
- Recognize fruits of the Spirit

Study. The best source from which we can study the attributes of God is the standard works. Using the computer as a tool, we can systematically search the scriptures for each attribute. The Topical Guide and Bible Dictionary are valuable assets in using the scriptures to search topics. In addition, www.lds.org contains a wealth of information, including a database with the *Ensign* and other magazines.

Study alone is not enough when considering the things of God. Elder Dallin H. Oaks has said: “Despite the importance of study and reason, if we seek to learn of the things of God solely by this method, we are certain to stop short of our goal. We may even wind up at the wrong destination. Why is this so? On this subject God has prescribed the primacy of another method. To learn the things of God, what we need is not more study and reason, not more scholarship and technology, but more faith and revelation.”²¹

20. *Lectures on Faith*, 6:2–3.

21. Dallin H. Oaks, *The Lord’s Way* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 19.

Experiment upon the word. In Alma 32, Alma describes the importance of following up our study by *doing*—performing acts that will help strengthen our faith and study. He speaks of conducting an experiment upon the word. Effort always plays an important part of growth. In Lecture 6, we learn the importance of effort in the form of sacrifice in also knowing if our course in life is agreeable to God:

For a man to lay down his all, his character and reputation . . . requires more than mere belief or supposition that he is doing the will of God; but actual knowledge . . . he will enter into eternal rest, and be a partaker of the glory of God. . . . When he has this knowledge . . . his confidence can be equally strong that he will be a partaker of the glory of God. Let us here observe, that a religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation. . . . When a man has offered in sacrifice all that he has for the truth's sake, not even withholding his life, and believing before God that he has been called to make this sacrifice because he seeks to do his will, he does know, most assuredly, that God does and will accept his sacrifice and offering, and that he has not, nor will not seek his face in vain. Under these circumstances, then, he can obtain the faith necessary for him to lay hold on eternal life.²²

The following assignment, used in several university courses, has been designed to assist students in learning the importance of experimenting upon the word. Students are asked to choose an attribute and try applying it for a period of time, such as one week. They are then required to keep a journal and record their observations and effort for the time period. Their journal entries often include such things as how they selected the attribute, scriptures used to help their study, specific daily actions, and insights gained. At the end of the time period, they are asked to summarize their feelings about the experience. One student commented:

The three weeks I spent working on prayer, integrity, and kindness were very challenging and very rewarding. Sometimes I

22. *Lectures on Faith*, 6:5–9.

Ronald E. Terry

was discouraged because I continued to make mistakes in each of these areas and not fulfill my goals as well as I would like to. Despite this, when I was able to improve in some way I was excited to be actively moving in the right direction on the strait and narrow path. I may not be going very fast or very far, but I recall that the tortoise did win the race because he just kept going. There are so many things to do and ways to improve that it was very helpful to pick specific things to work on for a specific amount of time. This allows progress to take place without the overwhelming feelings of trying to do everything at once.

Record, reflect, and assess. Learning is enhanced by the process of recording our thoughts and feelings and reflecting on them. Writing can help people organize, think critically, and assess their thoughts. Proponents of using writing as a tool for learning see it as “the process of an individual mind making meaning from the materials of its experience.”²³

Not only is it good to record and reflect on our attempts to learn, but we should also have a time when we analyze what we have accomplished. Our weekly participation in the sacrament provides an excellent opportunity for self-introspection of both the renewal of covenants and of our efforts to become more like God. Elder Melvin J. Ballard spoke of the importance of the sacrament:

I should like to speak of the spirit and body as “me” and “it.” “Me” is the individual who dwells in this body, who lived before I had such a body, and who will live when I step out of the body. “It” is the house I live in, the tabernacle of flesh; and the great conflict is between “me” and “it.” I used to tell missionaries with whom I was identified for many years that it was an excellent thing once a week to go by themselves and examine themselves, find out how the battle was going, who was winning—“me” or “it”; to pass judgment upon one’s self, correct one’s mistakes and weaknesses, set one’s house in order. You do not have to make that kind of an appointment. The

23. C. A. Bergman, “Writing Across the Curriculum: An Annotated Bibliography,” *Writing Across the Curriculum: Current Issues in Higher Education* 3 (1983–84): 33–38.

Lord has made it for every member of this Church. It comes on the Sabbath day. It is at the sacrament meeting, when you see the emblems of the broken body and the spilt blood being prepared—that is the time for every man and woman to go into secret conference with himself or herself.²⁴

Observe and learn from others. Another thing that will help us learn about the attributes of God is to look for examples in the lives of others. We must be careful, of course, to look for people who truly exhibit a correct understanding of Christlike attributes. There are wonderful stories within our own family histories, Church history, and the lives of people that offer much from which we can learn.

Serve God. A line from a popular hymn contains the following words, “And our talents improve by the patience of hope and the labor of love.”²⁵ As we are in the service of God, we will be able to develop and improve the attributes we are pursuing. President Gordon B. Hinckley has specifically commented on the value of missionary service in our growth and development:

I know that our young men are under a great obligation to qualify themselves through education to fill positions of responsibility in the world. Their time is precious. But I do not hesitate to promise that the time spent in faithful and devoted service as a missionary declaring the Master will only add to their qualifications for positions of responsibility in the future. Regardless of the vocation they choose to pursue, they will be better qualified in their powers of expression, in their habits of industry, in the value they place on training, in the integrity of their lives, and in their recognition of a higher source of strength and power than that which lies within their native capacity.²⁶

24. Melvin J. Ballard, “Struggle for the Soul,” *New Era*, March 1984, 32. This talk was first delivered in the Salt Lake Tabernacle, May 5, 1928.

25. “Come, Let Us Anew,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 217.

26. Gordon B. Hinckley, “He Slumbers Not, nor Sleeps,” *Ensign*, May 1983, 8.

Ronald E. Terry

Pray and ask of God. When Jesus visited the American continent after His death, He gave this counsel, “And whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, which is right, believing that ye shall receive, behold it shall be given unto you” (3 Nephi 18:20). As we seek to acquire the attributes of God, we need to ask for His help. He has promised us that if we ask, seek, and knock, the door would be open for that help. Prayer is an instrumental part of the process of becoming like God. Note the following scriptural admonition to pray for the attribute of love: “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ; that ye may become the sons of God; that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is; that we may have this hope; that we may be purified even as he is pure” (Moroni 7:48).

All the attributes are given in their perfect state as a gift from God. For this reason, Moroni suggests that our prayers include not only a plea for help in developing an attribute, but also a plea for His grace to make up the difference between the ideal and our development. In his book *The Broken Heart*, Elder Bruce C. Hafen discusses two applications of grace and mercy in the plan of salvation. The first application is how the Savior’s Atonement satisfied the demands of justice relative to the transgression in the Garden of Eden and to our own transgressions and shortcomings. Elder Hafen then adds, “A second application of mercy may be seen in the grace-filled bestowal of endowments that perfect and purify us in the process of growing spiritually toward a divine and sanctified nature.”²⁷ We are first made just and then made perfect through the Atonement of the Savior. The role of grace is vital in the process of our becoming like the Father. We can find reassurance in the words of Moroni that Jesus will, through the Atonement, make up for our shortcomings as we seek the mind of Christ:

Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of

27. Bruce C. Hafen, *The Broken Heart* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 144.

all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ; and if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in nowise deny the power of God.

And again, if ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ, and deny not his power, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot. (Moroni 10:32–33)

Recognize fruits of the Spirit. A good way to know if our course in life is becoming agreeable to God is to examine the fruits that are yielded from our efforts. From the scriptures we learn that the fruits associated with a Christlike life consist of joy, peace, love, happiness, gentleness, meekness, a contrite spirit, and edifying language. Contrast these with the fruits of Satan, which include envy, lust, malice, anger, crudeness, unrest, and hatred.

Satan cannot duplicate true peace because it is a gift to those who keep the commandments of God. Feelings of peace are given to us by God in the form of revelation. Receiving revelation to confirm our choices needs to be a vital part of our daily living and of our seeking the mind of Christ regarding a difficult ethical dilemma. Elder Gerald N. Lund provided insight to the revelatory process by posing the following three questions:

1. What is the voice of the Lord like?
2. How can I distinguish between true and counterfeit revelation?
3. What can I do to enhance my ability to hear, recognize, and follow the voice of the Lord?²⁸

The scriptures teach us the answer to question 1. The Lord has said, “Yea, behold, I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart. Now, behold, this is the spirit of revelation” (D&C 8:2–3). In a

28. Gerald N. Lund, “The Voice of the Lord,” Brigham Young University devotional address, December 2, 1997.

Ronald E. Terry

world filled with noise, it can be difficult to hear the Holy Ghost as He speaks to us in our minds and in our hearts. President Boyd K. Packer has commented: “The Spirit does not get our attention by shouting or shaking us with a heavy hand. Rather it whispers. It caresses so gently that if we are preoccupied we may not feel it at all. . . . Occasionally it will press just firmly enough for us to pay heed. But most of the time, if we do not heed the gentle feeling, the Spirit will withdraw and wait until we come seeking and listening.”²⁹

Elder Lund gave five principles to help answer question 2:

1. It is God who determines all aspects of revelation.
2. The content given in a revelation is more important than the form in which it comes.
3. True revelation generally does not contradict gospel principles or go contrary to established Church policy and procedure.
4. The Lord wants us to use our agency and develop spiritual self-reliance.
5. Individuals are not given revelation to direct another person unless they have priesthood or family responsibility for that person.³⁰

While the answer to question 3 can be highly individualized, there are some universal activities that can enhance our ability to hear, recognize, and follow the voice of the Lord. These include reading and studying the scriptures and general conference addresses, praying with faith, fasting with purpose, attending the temple, and rendering quality service.

Pressing Forward with Faith

We have discussed the importance of becoming perfect like the members of the Godhead so that we can begin to think and act as they would when faced with an ethical dilemma. Many of us, however, when faced with the task of becoming perfect, give up in despair and say that

29. Boyd K. Packer, “The Candle of the Lord,” *Ensign*, January 1983, 53.

30. Lund, “The Voice of the Lord,” BYU devotional address.

the goal of perfection is beyond our reach. We have discussed the role of grace in realizing the perfection of attributes, but some still feel hopeless when faced with the seemingly overwhelming tasks of daily life. In these times we must believe the Savior when He says He can help us overcome our faults and shortcomings. In spite of His words of comfort, many members who know of their failings ask how they can ever become perfect in this life. The Prophet Joseph Smith said: “When you climb up a ladder, you must begin at the bottom, and ascend step by step, until you arrive at the top; and so it is with the principles of the Gospel—you must begin with the first, and go on until you learn all the principles of exaltation. But it will be a great while after you have passed through the veil before you will have learned them. It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it will be a great work to learn our salvation and exaltation even beyond the grave.”³¹ Elder McConkie added these comforting words:

What we do in this life is chart a course leading to eternal life. That course begins here and now and continues in the realms ahead. We must determine in our hearts and in our souls, with all the power and ability we have, that from this time forward we will press on in righteousness; by so doing we can go where God and Christ are. If we make that firm determination, and are in the course of our duty when this life is over, we will continue in that course in eternity. That same spirit that possesses our bodies at the time we depart from this mortal life will have power to possess our bodies in the eternal world. If we go out of this life loving the Lord, desiring righteousness, and seeking to acquire the attributes of godliness, we will have that same spirit in the eternal world, and we will then continue to advance and progress until an ultimate, destined day when we will possess, receive, and inherit all things.³²

Although personal perfection is not required in this life, we must earnestly seek and strive to overcome the world, come to Christ, and

31. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 348.

32. Bruce R. McConkie, “The Seven Deadly Heresies,” in *Speeches of the Year, 1980* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1981), 78–79.

Ronald E. Terry

develop the attributes and characteristics of God. Our hearts and minds must be single to the glory of God. This condition is not only important for our exaltation in the future but also for us to be able to respond correctly to the ethical dilemmas we face in mortality.

Dealing with Our Shortcomings

Assuming that we are not relativists and that we are seeking the mind of Christ, why do we sometimes make the wrong decision? There are several reasons why we make wrong decisions. We will consider four:

1. We are missing the mark.
2. We allow our standards to drift with the world.
3. We let our attachments cloud our vision.
4. We are sometimes more concerned with our personal rights than our responsibilities.

We are missing the mark. In setting up standards or laws to help us become more like our Savior, we can get so focused on laws and standards that we forget the overall goal in becoming one with Christ. This happened to the people of Israel as they attempted to live the law of Moses. Moses was instructed by God to set up a system of laws for the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt. The laws were intended to bring people to Christ, as Amulek pointed out to the Zoramites (see Alma 34:13–14).

Jacob previously warned the Nephites that they were as some of the Jews: “But behold, the Jews were a stiffnecked people; and they despised the words of plainness, and killed the prophets, and sought for things that they could not understand. Wherefore, because of their blindness, which blindness came by *looking beyond the mark*, they must needs fall . . . that by the stumbling of the Jews they will reject the stone upon which they might build and have safe foundation” (Jacob 4:14–15; emphasis added). Elder Maxwell commented on this verse as follows: “My fellowmen, it matters so very much how we regard and view Jesus Christ. Some seek to substitute Caesars for Christ. Others are blinded because they are ‘looking beyond the mark’ (Jacob 4:14) when the mark

is Christ.”³³ Elder Holland added, “Jacob saw that the Jews would look ‘beyond the mark’ and stumble in their search for the Holy One of Israel, this literal Son of God to be known as Jesus Christ: ‘By the stumbling of the Jews they will reject the stone upon which they might build and have safe foundation.’”³⁴

The great King Benjamin described his people as “a diligent people in keeping the commandments of the Lord” (Mosiah 1:11). Before he died, he gathered his people to give them some final counsel. He told about being visited by an angel who taught him “glad tidings of great joy” concerning Christ (Mosiah 3:3). He then spoke to them about the Atonement and of our divine indebtedness. He taught that all we can attempt to give back to the Father and the Son is our gratitude, obedience, and service. Following this great discourse, his people fell to the earth because “they had viewed themselves in their own carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth” (Mosiah 4:2). Even though before this speech they had been a righteous people and were diligent in keeping God’s commandments, after hearing about the Savior’s mission, their hearts were changed, and they had “no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2).³⁵ We sometimes find ourselves caught up in the busyness of life and the sometimes seemingly blind obedience to rules that can lead to a reduced focus on seeking the mind of Christ. This gives us the potential of making a wrong decision during a dilemma-resolution procedure.

We allow our standards to drift with the world. President Hinckley has said, “While standards generally may totter, we of the Church are without excuse if we drift in the same manner.”³⁶ If we are drifting from

33. Neal A. Maxwell, “Jesus of Nazareth, Savior and King,” *Ensign*, May 1976, 26.

34. Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant: The Messianic Message of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 72.

35. Ronald E. Terry, “Recognizing the Lord and His Healing Influence in the Book of Mormon and in Our Own Lives,” Brigham Young University devotional address, June 7, 2005.

36. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, April 1979, 21.

Ronald E. Terry

standards and absolute truths, we may have a difficult time seeking the mind of Christ on a difficult ethical dilemma. Figure 1 depicts the concept of spiritual drift.

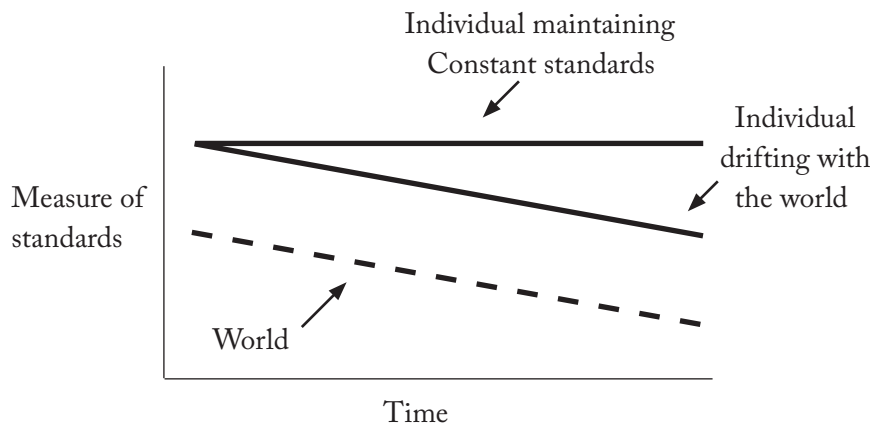


Fig. 1. Spiritual drift of standards

Many agree that the world's standards are drifting downward with time, as shown by the dashed line. The solid horizontal line represents an individual maintaining the constant standards that God has established. Individuals trying to keep their standards higher than the world's standards could be fooled into allowing theirs to drift downward, as shown by the solid angled line. An individual following this trend could find himself at the same measure of standards that the world was at an earlier time. Elder Maxwell commented on the challenge that we have in staying true to absolute standards: "We are immortal individuals whose constant challenge is to apply immortal principles to life's constantly changing situations. . . . If we are truly attached to immortal principles, some decisions need to be made only once, really, and then righteous reflexes can do the rest. Absent such fixed determinations, however, one can be tossed to and fro by temptations which then require case-by-case agonizing."³⁷

37. Neal A. Maxwell, *The Pathway of Discipleship*, Church Educational System fireside address, Brigham Young University, January 4, 1998.

Sometimes this spiritual drift is a result of rationalization—it's okay; it's just a little white lie. Rationalization refers to the justifying of behavior, even though we are aware of a higher set of standards. In this sense, rationalization is simply another form of relativism. If we justify disobedience from standards, then we are effectively saying that the standards are arbitrary and do not need to be obeyed in certain situations. There are standards or there are not. We cannot have it both ways. Spiritual drift from absolute standards could lead to mistakes in ethical decision making.

We let our attachments cloud our vision. Keshavan Nair, in *A Higher Standard of Leadership: Lessons from the Life of Gandhi*, defined *attachments* as “relationships, possessions, privileges, and other components of our life we do not want to give up.”³⁸ These attachments are rooted in pride and the carnal nature of man, and when we let them affect our standards our judgment can become impaired. During these times, it will be difficult to seek the mind of Christ on the matter at hand because our focus and energy will be directed toward our attachments and ourselves. Commenting on an increasingly attachment-focused society, Elder Maxwell said, “An eminent Japanese thinker recently looked at our pleasure-centered Western society and wrote insightfully of a dilemma growing out of this sense so many mortals have of planlessness and purposelessness. He wrote, ‘If there is nothing beyond death, then what is wrong with giving oneself wholly to pleasure in the short time one has left to live? The loss of faith in the “other world” has saddled modern Western society with a fatal moral problem.’”³⁹

Many civilizations have flourished and then decayed when pride led to the pursuit of pleasure and power. The Nephite civilization underwent repeated cycles of righteousness and wickedness, largely because of the pursuit of these attachments. The Lord has provided the following counsel in our day: “Behold, there are many called, but few are chosen. And why are they not chosen? Because their hearts are set so

38. Keshavan Nair, *A Higher Standard of Leadership: Lessons from the Life of Gandhi* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1997), 37.

39. Neal A. Maxwell, *The Pathway of Discipleship*, Church Educational System fireside address, Brigham Young University, January 4, 1998.

Ronald E. Terry

much upon the things of this world, and aspire to the honors of men, that they do not learn this one lesson—that the rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven, and that the powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled only upon the principles of righteousness” (D&C 121:34–36).

We are sometimes more concerned with our rights than our responsibilities. We have become a society that is so obsessed with personal rights that we are neglecting the responsibilities that are needed to support those rights. Mosiah taught his people the importance of maintaining a balance between rights and responsibilities as a new form of government was being instituted among the Nephite people: “I desire that this land be a land of liberty, and every man may enjoy his rights and privileges, . . . but that the burden should come upon all the people, that every man might bear his part. . . . [They] became exceedingly anxious that every man should have an equal chance throughout all the land; yea, and every man expressed a willingness to answer for his own sins” (Mosiah 29:32, 34, 38).

Throughout history, societies have struggled with the proper balance of rights and responsibilities. When the two got out of balance, the imbalance led to improper choices regarding ethics. For instance, in Athens, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle attempted to counter the ideas of relativism promoted by the Sophists with rigid definitions of truth, goodness, and virtue. However, the people of Athens drifted away from applying these definitions and eventually pursued an attitude of freedom from responsibility. Sir Edward Gibbon, author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, wrote the following about the fall of Athens: “In the end, more than they wanted freedom, they wanted security and they wanted a comfortable life. And they lost it all—security, comfort, and freedom. The Athenians finally wanted not to give to society, but for society to give to them. When the freedom they wished for most was freedom from responsibility, then Athens ceased to be free.”⁴⁰

40. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, as quoted by Margaret Thatcher, “The Moral Challenges for the Next Century,” *BYU Magazine*, August 1996.

Conclusion

Resolving ethical dilemmas can be extremely difficult because they often involve choices between competing goods and frequently require “heat-of-the-moment” decision-making. To resolve a dilemma correctly, the philosophy that forms the foundation of our moral reasoning must reflect deeply held convictions that align with the mind of Christ. This foundation requires an understanding of His true character as we strive to become as He is. President Spencer W. Kimball spoke of the challenge of trying to become one with Christ: “The cultivation of Christlike qualities is a demanding and relentless task—it is not for the seasonal worker or for those who will not stretch themselves, again and again.”⁴¹

We may feel that after much prayer and meditation we have not received a confirmation to our resolution. If we have sincerely done our part in the resolution process and are striving with all our might to make our course in life agreeable to God and we have followed the principles of receiving revelation discussed above, then we can take assurance in the words of President Brigham Young: “Learn the will of God, keep His commandments and do His will, and you will be a virtuous person. . . . If you can know the will of God and do it, you will be a virtuous person, and will receive knowledge upon knowledge, and wisdom upon wisdom, and you will increase in understanding, in faith, and in the light of eternity, and know how to discriminate between the right and the wrong.”

And then he spoke these powerful words: “If I ask Him to give me wisdom concerning any requirement in life, or in regard to my own course, or that of my friends, my family, my children, or those that I preside over, and get no answer from Him, and then do the very best that my judgment will teach me, He is bound to own and honor that transaction, and He will do so to all intents and purposes.”⁴² This is a tremendous promise, but it requires much faith and effort on our part. The key to validate this promise is to do all we can to become like Jesus and seek His will.

41. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 167.

42. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:205.