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# Parenthood — An Apprenticeship for Godhood

Based on a present action made at the April, 1979 AMCAP Convention

By L. Alan Westover\*

## Introduction

In consequence of Joseph Smith's contributions, our perspective of human behavior, and more specifically, family relationships, remains unique. Included among his insights are three key principles which provide the LDS professional community with a unique philosophical frame of reference, a perspective which should be far more productive than the competing philosophies of the world. We will briefly explore these principles and then seek to apply them to the substantive realm of parent-child relationships. We will seek to demonstrate that parenthood is nothing less than an apprenticeship for Godhood.

## Intelligence

The first principle we will explore here pertains to the origins of man. Joseph Smith taught the existence of a primal, uncreated element in the universe which, like matter and truth, cannot be created nor destroyed. Further, the element possesses the inherent power to act for itself in whatever environment it is placed. (See D&C 58:27-28; 93:23, 29-32.) This element, which Joseph Smith called intelligence, has the capacity to grow in knowledge, power, glory, and nobility, if it obeys the laws upon which such growth is contingent.

All the minds and spirits that God ever sent into the world are susceptible of enlargement.

The first principles of the gospel are self-existent with God. God himself, finding he was in the midst of spirits and glory, because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself. The relationship we have with God places us in a situation to advance in knowledge. He has power to institute laws to instruct the weaker intelligences, that they may be exalted with himself, so that they might have one glory upon another and all that knowledge, power, glory and intelligence, which is requisite to save them in the world of spirits. (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p. 354.) (Also see Abraham 3:19-26.)

Orson Pratt further amplified our understanding of the intelligence:

The capacities of all spiritual substances are eternal as the substance to which they belong. There is no substance in the universe which feels and thinks now, but what has eternally possessed that capacity. ("The Seer," I. July, 1853, p. 102.)

As these quotations suggest, God organized some of the numberless primal intelligences into spiritual

beings after His image. These beings thus became the literal children of God possessing the potential of achieving the status of exalted beings.

## This Life A "Field Test"

Joseph Smith taught that because the prerogatives of Godhood are infinite and because intelligences vary in their willingness to discipline their lives to the truth, our Father in Heaven chose to "field test" His children to see which of them would choose to continue to progress and which would choose to stop or dam their progress short of eternal life. The test would be simple—He would reveal to each child a measure of the truth and then evaluate their behavioral performance against that standard. (Abraham 3:25-26; D&C 82:3-4, 88:21-24; 93:31-32.) The second key principle taught by Joseph Smith, then, was the purpose of this mortal life. We are to be tested or proven to see if we are "God material." The planet Earth is a proving grounds, much like missile proving grounds; and just as only those missiles which prove reliable are ultimately pressed into service, so it will be with us.

## Stewardship

The third principle which Joseph taught in amplified form was the principle of stewardship. As taught in the parable of the talents, the Lord will not make us rulers over many things in eternity until we have been judged faithful stewards over a few talents in this temporary proving ground. The principles of stewardship and accountability are interdependent concepts.

It is wisdom in me; therefore, a commandment I give unto you, that ye shall organize yourselves and appoint every man his stewardship; that every man may give an account unto me of the stewardship which is appointed unto him. For it is expedient that I, the Lord, should make every man accountable, as a steward over earthly blessings, which I have made and prepared for my creatures. (D&C 104:11-13.)

The Lord reminds us that it is His prerogative to assign stewardships over material things because all things are His. (See D&C 104:14.) Because all things are His, He can appropriately say, "Moses, this land is yours and those other guys are going to have to leave." Or, "Malachi, if you and your people do not return one-tenth of my property as you have been instructed, you are cursed robbers."

A second substantive area of stewardship is that of truth. And just as all material things are the Lord's, He is the **similar** possessor of all truth. Therefore, as in material things, He reserves unto Himself the right to disperse truth on His own terms. And, as in temporal things, He promises to give His children additional

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truth only if we behaviorally master the portion we already possess. Second Nephi 28, verse 30 illustrates this principle:

For behold, thus saith the Lord God: I will give unto the children of men line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little; and blessed are those who hearken unto my precepts and lend an ear unto my counsel, for they shall learn wisdom; for unto him that receiveth I will give more; and from them that shall say, We have enough, from them shall be taken away even that which they have.

The Doctrine and Covenants teaches that the power or authority to direct the affairs of people also belongs to the Lord: "Wherefore, be subject to the powers that be, until he reigns whose right it is to reign, and subjects all enemies under his feet." (D&C 58:22.) Because it is the Lord's right to rule and reign, He may assign stewardships in this realm as well. That the Lord exercises His prerogatives in delegating authority or power is taught again in Abraham, chapter 3. You recall, as He stood amongst the multitude of intelligences, to those who were noble and great He said, "These will I make my rulers; for he stood amongst those that were spirits and he saw they were good; and he said unto me: Abraham, thou art one of them. Thou wast chosen before thou wast born." (See Jeremiah 1:5.) When the Israelites needed a king, who chose David? It was the Lord. And speaking to the Twelve Apostles, the Lord specified, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you and ordained you." (John 15:16.) In the home it is the husband and father who has been delegated the authority to preside. (Moses 4:22, Eph. 5:22-23.)

Again, as in the other stewardship realms, the Lord promises one who rules as instructed. (viz. with kindness pure knowledge, virtue, without hypocrisy and unrighteous dominion, etc) the receipt of a fulness of priesthood power.

...then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God: the doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven. The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion, and thy scepter an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth: and thy dominion shall be an everlasting dominion, and without compulsory means it shall flow unto thee forever and ever. (D&C 121:34-46.)

In summary, the Lord says, "Look, I am going to assign you a small kingdom (a few talents) where you can do only limited damage; and if you utilize the authority as I direct, then I will make you ruler over many things. If you abuse the stewardship that you are provided, I will take away your talent and give it to another who exercises his agency responsibly. Behold, there are many called (given a stewardship of talents), but few are chosen (made rulers over many things) because few magnify their allotted talents as instructed by their Eternal Father."

### Parent-Child Relationships

Perhaps the most precious of all our talents is that of family. The powers of procreation together with the

responsibility of parenthood is the fundamental challenge of Godhood, and this life is the time in which we demonstrate our willingness to parent in the fashion exemplified by our Father in Heaven. It may be that we too often fail to look to this perfect model of effective parenting as we struggle with such sensitive issues as the setting and enforcing of limits in the home. It is here, in the final examination that is this life, that each parent must demonstrate the ability to correctly apply the eternal principles of stewardship and free agency. In this context, the prophetic warnings that no other success can compensate for failure in the home, and that the hearts of the fathers must turn to the children acquire enormous meaning.

Perhaps the most clear and concise illustration we have of our Heavenly Father functioning in the role of parent is the account of His dealings with Adam and Eve. While in the garden, Adam and Eve enjoyed the blessings and limitations of childhood. Like the small child, Adam and Eve did not comprehend the difference between good and evil; they were unashamed of their nakedness, and unable to bear children. Their temporal needs were fully provided by a loving parent. Thus, the relationship of Adam and Eve to the Lord appears clearly to have been that of children to parent. Let us explore now the Lord's approach to setting and enforcing limits in the home:

And I, the Lord God, took the man, and put him into the Garden of Eden, to dress it, and to keep it. And I, the Lord God, commanded the man, saying: Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat, But of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it, nevertheless, thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee; but remember that I forbid it, for in the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. (Moses 3:15-17.)

We first note that the Lord reserved to himself the prerogative of defining the bounds and conditions of His kingdom. The rules of the garden were not arrived at democratically. Further, the Lord wasted no time in communicating to Adam the limits of acceptable behavior. He communicated the limits immediately upon introducing Adam to the garden, before there was any opportunity for naive error. (It is worthy of note that the Lord revealed His law to the patriarch Adam before Eve was placed in the garden.)

The set of acceptable behaviors was first communicated whereby Adam knew what behaviors he could appropriately engage in, after which the restrictive limits were defined. In setting the limits the Lord did several interesting things:

1. He was very specific and clear in defining the prohibited behavior, leaving no room for confusion or misunderstanding ("But of the tree...thou shalt not eat of it.").

2. He was very specific in defining the consequences of the prohibited behavior, which consequences were both bitter and immediate ("...for in the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.").

3. He carefully explained the reasons why the specific fruit was forbidden. Certainly He must have also clarified the meaning of physical and spiritual death to Adam.

4. He granted Adam freedom to act for himself independently ("Nevertheless, thou mayest chose for thyself, for it is given unto thee...").

Parents might well ask themselves, "Have we as husband and wife, king and queen, determined what the law of our kingdom will be? Have we adopted a single law which is specific and unmistakable and that we both actively support? Have we determined what specific consequences will follow violation of established limits? Are the consequences sufficiently bitter? Are they enforced immediately? Have we clearly communicated these limits to our children, explaining insofar as possible why we have chosen these particular standards? Have we granted our children agency or have we instead chosen to control their behavior, 'that one soul shall not be lost'?"

Like most children, Adam and Eve tested the established limits and partook of the forbidden fruit. It is noteworthy that while their Heavenly Parent was certainly aware of the impending transgression, He did not rush down to remind Adam and Eve of the behavioral consequences nor did He attempt to force them to comply with the established limits. Upon partaking of the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve became aware of their nakedness and like most errant children sought to avoid the piercing eyes of their father.

And I, the Lord God, called unto Adam, and said unto him: Where goest thou? And he said: I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I beheld that I was naked, and I hid myself. And I, the Lord God, said unto Adam: Who told thee thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldst not eat, if so thou shouldst surely die? (Moses 4: 15-17.)

Why did the Lord ask Adam and Eve these questions for which He already knew the answers? Was He not providing them with an opportunity to openly confess their errors and accept responsibility for the consequences which were to follow?

The Lord heard their confessions and immediately imposed the promised consequences. Where was mercy and compassion? We must remember this was Adam and Eve's first mistake. There were extenuating circumstances in that they were bequiled by the serpent. Surely they deserved a second chance. Why didn't the Lord say something like this?

"Well, Adam and Eve, I think you've learned an important lesson today. Your attitude is repentant; this is your first mistake and you were tricked by the serpent. I'll tell you what...this time you don't have to experience physical and spiritual death...but I'm warning you, if you do it again you'll be in big trouble."

The Lord had powerful reasons for responding as He did, reasons most of us have need to ponder:

Therefore I, the Lord God, will send him forth from the Garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken; For as I, the Lord God, liveth, even so my words cannot return void, for as they go forth out of my mouth they must be fulfilled. (Moses 4:29-30.)

The Lord would not lie to His children nor would He deny them their agency. To have done so would have thwarted the purpose of the plan of salvation and destroyed the credibility He had with His children.

Furthermore, He understood that only by tasting the bitter could Adam and Eve appreciate the sweet and learn by experience to distinguish the good from the evil. Again, each parent should examine his interactions with his children to weed out idle threats, lies, or attempts to "bluff" children into doing what is right. Children are far too perceptive to be fooled by such transparent, clumsy efforts.

Often parents mistakenly believe they are being merciful when they fail to enforce the consequences their children have chosen. To insulate children from the natural consequences of their independent choices is not reflective of a mature parental love, for such a response encourages the child to repeat his irresponsible behavior. The premature application of mercy is devastating in its consequences.

As difficult as was Adam and Eve's transition from childhood into adulthood when they left the garden, perhaps the most bitter of the consequences was spiritual death, the separation from their Father. Imagine the bitterness they must have tasted on this occasion:

And Adam and Eve, his wife, called upon the name of the Lord, and they heard the voice of the Lord from the way toward the Garden of Eden, speaking unto them, and they saw him not; for they were shut out from his presence. (Moses 5:4.)

Here, the Lord sharply reminded Adam and Eve of the harsh reality of the spiritual death they had chosen, calling to them from the garden they were no longer qualified to enter. But the bitterness they experienced in contrast to the joy they had previously known in the presence of God was the motivating force behind their subsequent obedience to their Father.

And he gave unto them commandments that they should worship the Lord their God, and should offer the firstlings of their flocks, for an offering unto the Lord. And Adam was obedient unto the commandments of the Lord. (Moses 5:5.)

Adam did not demand to know why he should offer sacrifices for he had already learned that he was far better off when he obeyed his Father.

And after many days an angel of the Lord appeared unto Adam, saying: Why dost thou offer sacrifices unto the Lord? And Adam said unto him: I know not, save the Lord commanded me. (Moses 5:6.)

For the rest of his days, Adam lived a near-perfect life in a direct effort to qualify himself to re-enter the Kingdom of his Father.

Again we might well ask ourselves, "Do we as parents consistently keep our word and follow through with promised consequences? Do we ever mis-time the application of mercy in our dealings? Do we ever fail to enforce the consequences our children have chosen via their behavior? Do we indiscriminately bless our children without requiring that they obey the law upon which the blessing is predicated? Do we teach them to be irresponsible and dependent by insulating them from the lawful negative consequences of their behavior?"

Once Adam and Eve demonstrated their obedience, they were taught the Gospel of Jesus Christ by "holy angels sent forth from the presence of God," (Moses 5:6-8, 58-59; D&C 29:42.), and received the comforting spirit of the Holy Ghost (Moses 5:9.). After the Lord has enforced a penalty, reproving his children with sharpness, He allows us to forsake our errors with a promise that if we do so He will remember them no more. But, it was only after Adam and Eve demonstrated **behaviorly** their determination to obey their Father by keeping His commandments that the blessings of mercy, forgiveness, and redemption were granted. This is the place of mercy. We, too, must learn to show forth an increase of love following reproof, and learn to absolutely forgive our children their mistakes, remembering them no more, once the consequences have been enforced. We must not, however, give in to the temptation to eliminate the bitter consequences nor bestow unearned blessings. Our children will not pay the price of obedience if their responsible behavior is no more productive than their irresponsible behavior.

The Lord did not enforce the bitter penalty in a spirit of vengeance, but in a gentle spirit of love. The ground was cursed, not in a spirit of vindictiveness, but explicitly for Adam's "sake." (Moses 4:23.) The Lord did not feel frustrated and angry as He enforced the choices of His children, because He had clearly communicated the law of His kingdom in advance. He did not permit Adam and Eve's problem to become HIS problem. If we allow our children to be responsible for their own choices as did the Lord, there is no need nor room for us to behave in an emotionally immature or hostile manner when enforcing consequences. Parents, then, should assume responsibility for their own behavior by teaching their children correct principles, allowing their children to govern themselves. Children can only learn by experience to distinguish the good from the evil if parents permit them to experience the lawful consequences of their behavior.

The Lord has commanded parents to teach their child the first principles of the gospel as well as the principles of prayer, honest toil, and observance of the Sabbath (D&C 68:25-31.) that we not suffer them to go hungry or naked, nor to fight and quarrel and transgress the laws of God. We have been instructed to teach them to walk in the ways of truth and soberness, to love one another and serve one another (Mosiah 4:14-15.). Having magnified our stewardship by teaching the principles, the sins of our children will rest upon their own heads as free agents. "And every man whose spirit receiveth not the light is under condemnation." (D&C 93:32.) Our children, however pure, cannot choose to obey principles they have not been taught. Their agency is limited by our failure to magnify our parental stewardship. And to the degree this is so, their sins are upon our heads (D&C 68:25.).

The Lord's approach to parenting is not permissive nor is it controlling. A determination to follow the example of the Lord in parenting our children is no small commitment, nor is the task unchallenging. Apprentice parents who willingly discipline themselves to emulate the perfect parent, the Master Artisan, do so that one day these words may be spoken to them:

...Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of the Lord. (Matthew 25:21.)

That this may be our lot, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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