Review of Alan Hansen's Presentation

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In a time where many American youth are deconstructing, falling away, or leaving religious backgrounds, the ideas of perfection, being close to God, or achieving salvation seem to be a point of dissuasion for reconciling religion with human struggles. Dr. Alan Hansen provides a relational way to understand reconciliation and salvation. According to Dr. Hansen, many American, believing youth often struggle with understanding how they are saved, either by works, faith, or a combination of both. For many, the divide between being saved by faith or being saved by doing works of salvation is readily apparent. Christians, and especially members of the restored church or The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, grapple with and debate about this faith vs. works discussion often. In the restored church, young members often correlate perfect obedience, or perfect work, with salvation despite the doctrinal and experiential tension and dissonance this brings about. Often times this model of work for salvation, based on one’s integrity and endurance of will, is tiring for young clients and members of the restored church. Dr. Hansen feels that this is part of the faith crisis of our day. People aren’t perfect by any standard, and because of imperfection, they leave the faith groups, such as the restored church, because they are not able to live up to the standards according to these perfection models of salvation; the obstacle of being situationally perfect is too great to remain a member of faith.

To push away from perfectional situationalism, Dr. Hansen presents an alternative view to salvation and heaven, that it is relational rather than situational; Instead of focusing on one’s state of being in comparison to the perfect state of being, believers can think of what kind of relationship they have with God and others as a gauge for salvation. Dr. Hansen asserts that salvation is conditional upon each person’s relationships with God, Jesus Christ, and others. Jesus Christ asks of all people to be one even as he is one with his Heavenly Father (John 17), and this invitation for union is a relational understanding of coming to salvation, rather than a situational understanding. Salvation is a togetherness rather than individualistic perfection. Perhaps the divine call in the Sermon on the Mount to “be ye therefore perfect” is truly a call to be perfect in union with each other, rather than in some atomistic way to be perfect alone. To understand this call to perfection as a call to be in relation rather than in perfect status then makes a different implication for the topic of sin. Dr. Hansen’s relational understanding renders sin as an alienation from God, rather than just being immoral, wrong, bad, or evil. Human error is not seen as a trait or negative state, rather human error is seen as a turning away from God. Accordingly, turning back towards God, rather than towards a standard of perfection is what repentance is about. Herein, there is an
answer to the faith versus works discussion, in that people can come closer to God and salvation through both, because relationships operate on believing in and also working towards the other person, or in this case, God.

In therapeutic settings, clients can work through pain and shame through others, particularly through therapists, which is a powerful use for relationality rather than situationality. To experience joy, happiness, and peace one must make a relational turn back towards God, Christ, and others, but in this relational turn we work through shame, pain, and fear. These things allow us to come to understand joy, happiness, and peace because of thinking through opposites that arise when confronting these things relationally with a therapist. In a relational perspective of sin, sin is more akin to a wound that keeps us from being with God, rather than a betrayal of God. Dr. Hansen calls for therapists and ecclesiastical leaders to try and approach sin from the standpoint of empathy and healing rather than judgment and shame. To take on clients or others burdens relationally, therapists and ecclesiastic leaders must take on and bear burdens together, mourn with those that mourn, rather than try to remove, avoid, or distract from the burdens that humans inherently bear.

Jesus Christ acts as the ultimate representation of this sort of relational approach to caring for others, from which therapists and ecclesiastical leaders ought to try and emulate if not fully embody. If anyone is seeking to understand how to bear the burdens of others, with the person, then they ought to study the way Jesus cares for and heals others.