

Our Relationship With Christ

A number of years ago while I was serving in a bishopric a brother in our ward stood to bear his testimony. I don't remember most of his words, but I do remember when he said words similar to the following:

This last week I had a problem I was facing, and I asked myself, "What would Jesus do?" I really couldn't picture Jesus in this situation, so I asked myself instead, "What would John _____ do?" Then the answer became clear and I was able to take care of it.

I remember that it seemed for a moment that time stood still, because the last name in the blank was mine, and I felt very self conscious. On the one hand, I am glad that someone feels that I am an example of Christlike living; on the other hand, I do not feel at all worthy to be compared to Christ.

Needless to say, I have reflected on that story many times over the ensuing years. One of the points that has truly struck me is, why is it hard to envision Christ's response in any given instance in our lives? The question "What would Jesus do?" has been taught in many venues, and should be a perfect guide. But if we don't know the answer it is of no use.

I think the root of the difficulty is that we don't truly know Christ. We come to know people around us through time spent together – conversing, working, playing, and generally sharing life. Most of us do not have the opportunity of walking in the Savior's physical company. We don't know the intonations of his voice, we are not familiar with his mannerisms of gesture and expression. He is, in terms of physical actuality, a historical figure.

To some extent, then, the question becomes, how are we supposed to get to know Christ? In fact, the general avenues we consider when getting to know someone are not open to us in our relationship with Deity. We are supposed to use different means in this friendship.

The first key is to study the scriptures and the words of the living prophets. These men represent individuals who have come to know Christ through a number of means, including personal contact. What we learn from them tells us little of Christ's physical attributes, but much of his nature, inclination, and plans for us.

The second key is to spend time in prayer. This is the mechanism which has been given us to communicate with God. Although prayer may appear to be a one-way conversation, true prayer requires listening as well. In prayer our hearts are attuned to the infinite, and we are made more open to the whisperings of the Holy Spirit. His mission is to testify of God and Christ, and through his influence we receive their words and will. Prayer should be exercised at all times, but as we come to know God's nature more completely it becomes a more effective tool for understanding God. And so it tends to be a positive feedback – once we start on the trail to knowing God, we know him more through prayer, and on and on.

The final key is to live up to the light and knowledge that we have of God's will for us. There are general guidelines given in the commandments as to how we should live. As we follow that council we become better able to distinguish God's personal instructions to us. As we respond to that instruction we likewise grow closer to God, and another positive feedback loop develops.

Knowing God and Christ is then a great process, not something that is likely to occur in discrete steps. As we seek diligently to know Christ the knowledge will come, but it may come so gradually that sometimes we fail to discern it.

Interestingly, though, this leads to another thought. I have spoken of knowing God the Father and Christ, even though I began with a discussion of our relationship with Christ. My basis for this is that God and Christ are so closely united in will and purpose that knowing one inevitably leads to knowing both. However, there is a widespread movement to emphasize a personal relationship with Christ. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this desire except probably in one of its more severe manifestations.

A number of years ago a popular professor and church speaker began what can almost be described as a movement which emphasized a “special relationship” with Christ through a series of steps which I no longer remember. The steps were, if I recall correctly, all righteous actions. However, the emphasis on a “special relationship” had the effect of producing a sort of spiritual elite class, which eventually became somewhat exclusive. Elder McConkie chose to address this phenomenon during a visit to BYU, and he spoke at some length on the subject of our relationship to Deity¹. At the time I found it to be a very

1 Bruce R. McConkie, *Our Relationship with the Lord*, 2 March 1928

insightful and inspiring talk. While doing research in preparation for this article, I searched on the Internet for this talk. I found that it is widely quoted by opponents of the church as evidence that we are not Christians. Two phrases that in particular capture the imagination of our opponents are:

There are yet others who have an excessive zeal which causes them to go beyond the mark. Their desire for excellence is inordinate. In an effort to be truer than true they devote themselves to gaining a special, personal relationship with Christ that is both improper and perilous.

...

I wonder if it is not part of Lucifer's system to make people feel they are special friends of Jesus when in fact they are not following the normal and usual pattern of worship found in the true Church.

It is true that by taking those two comments in isolation (or better yet, only fragments of them) you can make Elder McConkie sound pretty opinionated. Actually, he was very opinionated. However, if you take the time to read his talk in its entirety, you will find that the root of his opinion is true religion and pure worship, and he only opposes those things that lead us further from salvation. In this case, he is opposed to those who would exalt themselves by claiming some special charter from Christ, when in fact we are a community of believers and we worship God the Father together with the other two members of the Godhead.

I thought it worth adding this digression because the goal of our relationship with God is not to produce despair if we don't think we are getting there. Our relationship with Christ and God is meant to exalt us. As such, it is a part of a long process – the process of a lifetime, and indeed one that will last on into eternity. Every day is a step in this process. As much as anything we need to attune ourselves to recognizing our progress in this journey. As we do so we will be more open to inspiration and guidance, and we will find the joy in this life which is the legacy of the faithful.