

The Body: First Stewardship & Liahona of the Spirit

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Introduction: Over the years remarkable events led me repeatedly to ponder the role of the human body in the divine plan of salvation. I put this subject aside for more than a decade, but a recent conversation with a friend led me to finally write a commentary about it. The following essay is an edited and expanded version of what I wrote at that time.

In the Book of Mormon the Prophet Alma called the plan of salvation “the great plan of happiness”. (Alma 42:8) Around 1840 the Prophet Joseph Smith declared: “The great plan of happiness consists in having a body.” (Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith, p.220)

I was a young man in the mid-1970s when I read this statement for the first time, and since then I have considered it as one of the most profound and extraordinary truths of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. In the imperfect and fallen world the philosophies of men see the human body as a mere object for personal gratification or for aesthetic admiration, or as a temporary burden to be despised. Fortunately, through modern prophets the Lord restored the knowledge that the human body, regardless of any infirmities, imperfections, or other mortal limitations, is an indispensable divine gift for our eternal progression.

The First Stewardship

We can understand the body as the first stewardship or charge we receive from God as we enter the earthly environment, and at the same time it is an absolutely essential element in achieving future glories, honors, and eternal privileges far beyond our current mortal comprehension. Without a tangible body of flesh and bones there is no way to enjoy immortal glory, and without a body spirits consider themselves in bondage--imprisoned, enslaved, or subjugated, and yearn for the resurrection (Doctrine & Covenants 45:17; 138: 50).

Through his atoning sacrifice the Savior Jesus Christ assured to all mankind a future resurrection, through which the software of life will be applied to incorruptible matter, and all will receive their bodies again, free of limitations, imperfections, and mortal infirmities, and clothed in the measure of eternal glory that each person will be willing and prepared to receive (Doctrine & Covenants 88: 21-24, 27-39).

A “Liahona” to the Spirit

As we ponder on what the restored gospel of Jesus Christ teaches about the human body, we begin to see it as a tool, or figuratively as part of a “Liahona,” so to speak, for our eternal spirits. The Liahona given to the Prophet Lehi was an object “of curious workmanship”—carefully and accurately made, exquisite—activated (or “vivified”) by the power of God when its users exercised faith in the Lord (1 Nephi 16:10, 28-29). And the Liahona guided Lehi’s family to the more fertile parts of the wilderness (v.16).

I see in this an analogy with the human body in the mortal journey toward eternal glory. The body is also accurately and exquisitely built, and it doesn't take a degree in medicine to recognize that the human body is a marvel, a magnificent and incomparable spectacle, whether in mechanic, biochemical, hydrodynamic, electric, computational, or aesthetic terms. The human body was the pinnacle of the divine creation, and the only item in the creation identified as the "image and likeness of God" (Genesis 1:27). When we accept the doctrine of Jesus Christ and receive the ordinances of baptism by immersion and the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, our bodies cease to be mere complex biological organisms and become the dwelling of the Spirit of the Lord, or "temples".

"But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you." (Romans 8:11)

"And the light which shineth, which giveth you light, is through him who enlighteneth your eyes, which is the same light that quickeneth your understandings." (Doctrine & Covenants 88:11)

"For man is spirit. The elements are eternal, and spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fulness of joy; And when separated, man cannot receive a fulness of joy. The elements are the tabernacle of God; yea, man is the tabernacle of God, even temples ..." (Doctrine & Covenants 93:33-35)

As we live in a manner to have the "constant companionship" of the Holy Ghost (Doctrine & Covenants 121:46; in the dictionary: "constant (adj.): firm; invariable; dependable") we will be guided to the "more fertile parts" of this life, and we will progress and prosper in our righteous endeavors—be they related to families, professions, or other associations and earthly concerns. And through the ordinances of the gospel of Jesus Christ and a behavior in harmony with its principles and standards, obeying the divine commandments, our spirits receive the divine guidance and power necessary so that one day we may enter with our families into worlds of glory, our "promised land" in eternity.

Respect and Reverence for the Body

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught: "The design of God before the foundation of the world was that we should take tabernacles [bodies], that through faithfulness we should overcome and thereby obtain a resurrection from the dead, in this wise obtaining glory, honor, power, and dominion." (Teachings of Presidents of the Church – Joseph Smith, p.211).

In this manner we understand the indispensable role of the human body in our eternal journey. And that we might preserve the sacred character of our bodies, God gave us through the "Light of Christ", or consciousness, a natural sense of respect and reverence for the body. In the world this feeling is called decency, modesty, or even shame, but in reality it is the Light of Christ reminding us that we are dealing with the most sacred of all divine creations, the only identified as the "image and likeness of God".

This same divine influence causes us to cling to life and fear death, as reportedly stated the Prophet Joseph Smith: "If the people knew what was behind the veil, they would try by every means to commit suicide that they might get there. But the Lord in his wisdom ...

implanted the fear of death in every person that they might cling to life and thus accomplish the designs of their Creator.” (quoted by President Wilford Woodruff - 17 August 1877 - in Larson & Larson, “Diary of Charles Lowell Walker” 1:465-466)

In order to further protect the sacred character of the body and its powers, the Lord decreed the Law of Chastity, and inspired his prophets in every dispensation to teach us standards of dress and behavior to help us live in harmony with this law, according to our circumstances. One day we will have to give an account of how we took care of this assignment. The Prophet Joseph Smith said: “ We came to this earth that we might have a body and present it pure before God in the celestial kingdom.” (Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith, p.220.)

The mortal body was appointed by the God of heaven to be the dwelling of an immortal and pure spirit. On one occasion, when writing to a young woman about the respect for the body, I stated the following—and I would have written something similar to a young man: “The body is such a sacred gift that only one man on this planet should see it uncovered: your spouse. Only you—exclusively you—will choose the young man who will receive this rare and precious privilege. And only God and you will grant to this man the official permission to have this privilege, through the priesthood authority in the highest divine ordinance accessible to mortals: the new and everlasting covenant of marriage. An ordinance so sacred that can only be officiated in temples and after several stages of preparation.”

Symbolic Clothing

The human body has been covered in some form since the early dispensations of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Apocryphal texts suggest that our first parents, Adam and Eve, were clothed with glory or light while living in the Garden of Eden (Apocalypse of Moses xx:3; xxi:6). With the fall, the first couple lost that light and made for themselves aprons, which the Lord complemented with coats (in the dictionary: “lining” or “layers”) of skins. (Genesis 3:21; Moses 4:27).

Since then special clothing has also been used symbolically to represent authority and priestly endowments (Exodus 40:13-14; Doctrine & Covenants 138:30). Among these clothes, it is worth noting that veils have been used to cover extremely sacred objects (for example, the ark of the covenant - Exodus 40:1-3), and the faces of consecrated persons (as in the case of Rebecca, Moses and Elijah) in sanctified places, or in events related to the highest order of the priesthood, the new and everlasting covenant of marriage (Genesis 24:64-65; Exodus 34:30-35; 1 Kings 19:13). The sacredness of the body is once again reiterated, it being ancillary, in part conduit and auxiliary, in the manifestation of the power of the priesthood and of life, towards eternal salvation (Doctrine & Covenants 84:19-21).

The mortal human body has powers and capacities whose full extent we can hardly understand, despite all our scientific knowledge. These powers and capacities can be used in this world to do good and bring us great joy, and that’s why the Lord has commanded that “men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness; For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as men do good they shall in nowise lose their reward.” (Doctrine & Covenants 58:27-28)

The Psalmist wrote: “When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.” (Psalm 8:3-5)

Higher and Lower Forms of Life

Here we see one of the great differences between the philosophies of the world and the doctrines of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. The current scientific theories, based on imperfect and limited tools, can only see human beings as a higher form of animal life. The revelations received from courts of eternal glory by prophets of God lead us, by faith, to see human beings as a lower form of divine life.

On the other hand, the powers and capabilities of the body can be used in ways not entirely in harmony, or even contrary to divine laws and principles. By doing this a person discovers physical sensations and exaggerated emotions, which though “pleasing” to the body, do not elevate the person, do not build a foundation for eternity, and in some cases reduce the person to a mere servant of desires, appetites, and passions that by divine decree must be kept within certain limits set by God.

In view of this, the divine instructions that constitute the “Word of Wisdom” given by the Lord to members of his Church in the latter days can be seen as a form of “spiritual discipline”. Through it, Latter-day Saints show their devotion to God, increase the intensity of the power of the priesthood in their lives, and qualify for great blessings yet to take effect in their fullness. Every now and then one asks whether we may ingest “this-or-that,” when in fact it would be better to ask: “What measure of the divine power do I want in my life? And what influence would this substance have on my sensitivity to the power of God?”

The divine guidance that comes to us through the Light of Christ invites us to exercise our moral agency and dominate the desires, appetites, and passions of the mortal body (Doctrine & Covenants 93:30-31; 101:78). When a large number of people follow the good conscience, the Light of Christ, social norms tend to be based on that divine guidance. When that doesn’t happen, and people resist the influence of the Light of Christ, society begins to degenerate (Mosiah 29:26-27) under the pernicious influence of the “anything goes” mentality of moral relativism that preaches the basic idea that “If I think it’s good, or if I feel good about it, then no one should prohibit it.”

Our Duty and Accountability

President Brigham Young explained clearly our duty toward our spirits: “You cannot inherit eternal life, unless your appetites are brought in subjection to the spirit that lives within you, that spirit which our Father in Heaven gave. I mean the Father of your spirits, of those spirits which he has put into these tabernacles. The tabernacles must be brought in subjection to the spirit perfectly, or your bodies cannot be raised to inherit eternal life. ... Seek diligently, until you bring all into subjection to the law of Christ.” (Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young, p.204)

The Lord said, “And now, verily, verily, I say unto thee, put your trust in that Spirit which leadeth to do good—yea, to do justly, to walk humbly, to judge righteously; and this is my

Spirit. Verily, verily, I say unto you, I will impart unto you of my Spirit, which shall enlighten your mind, which shall fill your soul with joy” (Doctrine & Covenants 11:12-13).

“Blessed is he that keepeth my commandments, whether in life or in death; and he that is faithful in tribulation, the reward of the same is greater in the kingdom of heaven. Ye cannot behold with your natural eyes, for the present time, the design of your God concerning those things which shall come hereafter, and the glory which shall follow after much tribulation. For after much tribulation come the blessings. Wherefore the day cometh that ye shall be crowned with much glory; the hour is not yet, but is nigh at hand. Remember this, which I tell you before, that you may lay it to heart, and receive that which is to follow. ... ye are not able to abide the presence of God now, neither the ministering of angels; wherefore, continue in patience until ye are perfected.” (Doctrine & Covenants 58: 2-5; 67:13)

And regarding the future, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught: “While one portion of the human race is judging and condemning the other without mercy, the Great Parent of the universe looks upon the whole human family with a fatherly care and paternal regard; He views them as His offspring, and ... He is a wise Lawgiver, and will judge all men, not according to the narrow, contracted notions of men, but, ‘according to the deeds done in the body whether they be good or evil’ ...

“We need not doubt the wisdom and intelligence of the Great Jehovah; He will award judgment or mercy to all nations according to their several deserts, their means of obtaining intelligence, the laws by which they are governed, the facilities afforded them of obtaining correct information, and His inscrutable designs in relation to the human family; and when the designs of God shall be made manifest, and the curtain of futurity be withdrawn, we shall all of us eventually have to confess that the Judge of all the earth has done right.” (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, pp.217-218)

Through the divine revelations given in the latter days, we can feel extremely grateful for the divine blessing of having a mortal body, and for the opportunities and privileges available to us through it.

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