Discussions with My Friend:
An Introduction to the Gospel of Jesus Christ By David Stewart

Chapter 32: By Their Fruits Ye Shall Know Them

True religion consists not of sterile dogmas, but of practical principles which improve the lives of individuals, families, and societies, do good in the world, and enrich human relationships. A faith which does not accomplish these ends is unworthy of the attention of intelligent people. The fruits of faith as demonstrated in the behaviors of individuals and societies are central pieces of evidence which deserve prominent consideration.

Many religious discussions involve dogmatic theological arguments of partisans who ignore practical outcomes and sociologic data. Professional anti-Mormon Eric Johnson, who has built his career on publishing highly negative and misleading attacks on the LDS Church, briefly and grudgingly acknowledged that Latter-day Saints are well-known for their high moral code, chastity, honesty, observance of the Sabbath Day, emphasis on family life, generosity, and care for the poor, and recognizes that sectarian Christians might have much to learn from the example of Latter-day Saints in these and other areas.[1] He rationalizes his paid career of attacking the LDS Church and attempting to dissuade LDS members and prospective converts by stating that doctrinal differences "cannot be overwritten merely by a positive lifestyle."

"Merely" achieving the "positive lifestyle" of righteous living is not a peripheral concern as Johnson suggests, but lies at the core of constructive faith. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "The fatal trait of the times is the divorce between religion and morality." John the Baptist admonished his hearers: "Bring forth therefore fruitsmeet for repentance...the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire."[2] Christ taught that discipleship is not a creed, but a lifestyle: "And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?"[3] He declared the need not only to hear and say, but to do: "And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it."[4]
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The Savior taught that truth is established not by lengthy doctrinal disputations, but that "ye shall know them by their fruits."[5] He admonished the hypocrisy of those who denounce the mote in their brother's eye while overlooking the beam in their own, and declared:

> "A good tree bringeth not forth corrupt fruit; neither doth a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. For every tree is known by his own fruit. For of thorns men do not gather figs, nor of a bramble bush gather they grapes."[6]

Although the actions of single adherents do not define a faith, much can be learned from the fruits of faith as seen in the study of large groups of adherents. We must distinguish between the actions of nominal adherents who may be out of harmony with their religion's teachings, and the teachings of the faith itself. Are the adherents of a faith exemplars in personal health, family stability, honesty, productivity, and civic virtue? Or do they behave no differently from non-believers?

Biblical Christianity?
Surveys of both the members and the ministers of many mainline faiths demonstrate striking discrepancies between the

widespread beliefs and behaviors of these groups, biblical standards, and official church teachings. The purpose of such comparisons is not to condemn any group, but merely to assess how actual belief and behaviors measure up to ostensible scriptural standards, and to restore practical perspective to interfaith discussions which have often centered on abstract dogma rather than practical outcomes.

Consideration of belief is necessary because belief is the foundation for action. George Barna and other researchers have abundantly documented that although Bible-based beliefs do not guarantee correct moral choices, the increasing philosophical rejection of Biblical teachings by many Christians has been associated with problematic behavior patterns on the level of individuals and societies which similarly diverge from scriptural principles. In his book "Think Like Jesus," Barna considers at length the importance of establishing a proper Christ-centered worldview with a correct understanding of God, His nature, man's purpose on earth, and God's expectations of man, as such views play a formative role in directing day to day decision making and long-term goals and directions.

The Bible clearly teaches that Christ led a sinless life.[7] Yet George Barna reported in 2001 that only 28% of Episcopalians, 33% of Catholics, Lutherans, and Methodists, 45% of Adventists, and 55% of Baptists surveyed believe that Christ was sinless. [8] He reports that "46% of Hispanics, 43% of whites, and 38% of blacks agree with the idea that 'when He lived on earth, Jesus Christ was human and committed sins, like other people.[9] In 1997, Barna reported that 39% of Americans and 35% of born again Christians believe that Jesus Christ was crucified, but that He never had a physical resurrection. 45% of born again Christians, 51% of Baptists, 60% of mainline Protestants, and 68% of Catholics, believe that the devil is non-existent.[10] These trends are not new. In 1970, Christianity Today published a survey which found that the virgin birth of Christ is denied by 60 percent of Methodists, 49 percent of Presbyterians, 44 percent of Episcopalians, 34 percent of American Baptists, and 19 percent of American Lutherans.[11]

Even from a Born-again Evangelical view of the Bible, George Barna research finds that the "biblical purity" of teachings acknowledged by members of the LDS Church is above-average for Christians in general, and significantly higher among Latter-day Saints than Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and Catholics.

Christian Pastors and Ministers
Sectarian Christians' abandonment of many scriptural teachings is not purely a problem of poor followership. The theological departures among Christian ministers are similar to, and sometimes worse than, among lay members. Sociologist Jeffrey Hadden reported a survey of ten thousand mainline Protestant pastors in the May 1982 issue of Christ for the Nations magazine. When asked if Jesus Christ was born of a virgin, over 50% of pastors said "no." To the question "Was Jesus the Son of God?," over 80% of ministers replied "no." Is the Bible the inspired word of God? Over 80 percent said "No." Over 36% responded that they did not believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ. Similarly, the magazine Pulpit Helps reported a survey of 7,441 Protestant pastors. 51 percent of the Methodists, 35 percent of the Presbyterians, 30 percent of the Episcopalians, and 33 percent of the American Baptists did not believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

J. Kincaid Smith tells of his experience in Lutheran seminary: "When I graduated in 1973, to the best of my knowledge, none of my classmates, nor I, believed in any of the miraculous element in the Bible, in anything supernatural, no 6 day creation, that Adam and Eve were real historical people, that God really spoke to people, the flood with Noah and the Ark, the Red Sea parting. We believed that no Old Testament Scriptures foretold of Jesus of Nazareth, that Jesus was not anticipated in the Old Testament. No virgin birth."[12] Anglican Bishop David Jenkins, who represents the views of many Anglican ministers, states: "As for the virgin birth, they're the sort of stories that get told after you already believe somebody is very important. You don't have to believe in the virgin birth."[13]

Bishop James Thomas stated at the United Methodist Church Quadrennial General Conference in 1976: "We do not believe ... in rigid doctrinal concepts to hold us steady in a wavering world." A survey published in 1968 at Washington University by sociologist Jeffry Hadden reported that 60% of Methodist clergy do not believe in the virgin birth, and over 50% do not believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ.[14] 82% do not believe that the Bible is the perfect word of God, and 30% do not believe Trinitarian teachings that Jesus and God the Father are the same being. The impact of these beliefs spreads far beyond pastors' realization of the lack of divine authority and connection for their own denomination to challenge the very theological underpinning of Christianity: that God put mankind on earth according to a divine plan, that He has sought to communicate with and guide His faithful children from the beginning of time, that His son Jesus Christ came to earth to set a perfect example and to atone for the sins of the repentant, and that through his triumph over death all mankind will one day be resurrected and will stand before God to be judged. When a large proportion of clergy do not believe biblical teachings or the tenets of their own faith, it becomes apparent why many have been largely ineffective in inspiring others to hold to God's word for guidance in a troubled world.

Moral Decision-Making
The Apostle Paul described those who lack the "rigid doctrinal concepts" of scripture as "children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive."[15] Examination of modern research on belief and decision making bear out Paul's warning. The troubling theological situation in major Christian faiths is reflected in moral decision-making. Only 16% of Catholics, 25% of mainline Protestants, and 40% of born again adults rely on Bible or church teachings as their main source of moral guidance.[16] George Barna noted: "When asked the basis on which they form their moral choices, nearly half of all adults (44%) cited their desire to do whatever will bring them the most pleasing or satisfying results. Roughly one-sixth of the adult public (17%) bases its moral decisions on what they believe will make other people happy or minimize interpersonal conflict. The same percentage (17%) credits the values they were taught by their family as the dominant influence on their moral considerations. About one out of four adults (24%) lean primarily upon religious principles and teaching or Bible content when making moral decisions."[17] He continued: "among all adults, only 22 percent believed in moral absolutes, while 64 percent thought truth was always relative to the person concerned and their situation. Among those interviewed that were identified as being born again, just 32 percent believed in moral absolutes ... Among the teens ... eighty-three percent of all teens thought moral truth depended on the circumstances, with just 6 percent believing in absolute truth."

Belief and Lifestyle

In a study released on July 9, 2001, George Barna reports that 95% of Latter-day Saints, 90% of Protestants, and 88% of Catholics report praying to God over the past week. 13 Of US citizens identifying themselves as Latter-day Saints, 67% state that they read the Bible, 62% attend Sunday School (compared to just 16% of all US adults), 27% are involved in Church-related small groups. 40% were involved in Church-related service over the prior week, compared to 16% of US adults. [18] 71% of those identifying themselves as Latter-day Saints stated that they attended church within the past week.

The rejection of core Biblical principles by many professing Christians inevitably influences conduct. Among non-LDS Christians who claimed to have donated ten percent or more of their income to churches or ministries within the past year, Barna reported that an actual examination of their finances demonstrated that two-thirds of those individuals were lying.[19] Barna also reported that 40% of adults and 20% of born again Christians had viewed pornography within the past seven days, and 58% of all adults, 54% of mainline Christians, 42% of weekly church attendees, and 36% of born again Christians believe that premarital co-habitation is morally acceptable. Notwithstanding scriptural admonitions for moral purity, sociologic studies have demonstrated that 95% of Americans - the vast majority of them Christians - have engaged in premarital sex; even among those who abstain from sex before age 20, over 80% engaged in premarital sex by middle age.[20] Dr. Finer demonstrates that these trends are not new, but date back at least to those born in the 1940s, and possibly even earlier. 77% of male and 66% of female U.S. high school students nationwide, the large majority of which are Christians, report having premarital relations.[21], [22]

In contrast, Top and Chadwick report that 10% of male senior LDS seminary students and 17% of female senior seminary students in the United States report having premarital relations.[23] 24% of male LDS senior seminary students reported having smoked cigarettes. LDS youth were much less likely than non-LDS youth to have ever been drunk: 17% and 12% of LDS boys and girls, respectively, compared to 63% and 59% of their non-LDS counterparts. While there is still much room for improvement, these statistics demonstrate that LDS teachings provide a solid moral foundation in an increasingly secular world.

Education and Faith
George Barna found that adults under the age of 35, people with college degrees and above average household income levels, and individuals attending large churches were found to be more likely to deviate from traditional Christian teachings and values. Increasing education is almost proverbially associated with secularism and skepticism of Protestant Christianity. The opposite is true of Latter-day Saints, who experience higher church activity rates among both men and women as their level of education rises.[24] Some teachings of sectarian Christian churches may be difficult or impossible for many educated individuals to reconcile with their own experience and observed fact, while Latter-day Saint teachings find that increased education only increases their gospel testimony as they observe the consistency of LDS teachings with the natural world, good scholarship, and the promptings of the Holy Spirit to both the heart and mind.

The Book of Mormon prophesies that in our day, many churches will "deny the Holy Ghost, which giveth utterance."[25] Although this statement would have been hard to conceive of in the early 19th century environment of religious revival in which the Book of Mormon was brought forth, modern research has increasingly documented its veracity. Barna research shows that a majority of all born-again Christians reject the existence of the Holy Spirit.[26] Individuals cannot possibly be guided by the Holy Spirit when they do not believe in its existence and acknowledge decision-making processes based in personal satisfaction or upbringing rather than a desire to know and follow God's will.

Many sectarian denominations claim to be "Bible-based" although the majority of their adherents and even many pastors reject in belief and conduct the core Biblical teachings which they claim to advocate. The Book of Mormon prophet Nephi testified of the apostasy among his own people: "there were many churches which professed to know the Christ, and yet they did deny the more parts of his gospel."[27] Nephi's description seems to aptly describe the state of much of the Christian world today. We might be inclined to wonder, as the Book of Mormon prophet Jacob, "how is it possible that these, after having rejected the sure foundation, can ever build upon it, that it may become the head of their corner?"[28] Christ's true church is built upon the rock of revelation and not on the teachings of men, and Christ's true disciples strive to follow his example in word and deed instead of emulating the ways of the world.

Christ's Church Today
Latter-day Saints are secure in the knowledge that Jesus Christ is the son of God, that he lived a perfect and sinless life, and that He died and was resurrected on the third day. Latter-day Saints know that salvation comes only through the atonement of the Savior Jesus Christ. The Bible and Book of Mormon provide enduring moral principles and spiritual truths that can help all people draw nearer to God in a changing world.

The positive record of Latter-day Saints in these areas, as well as abundant evidence that sectarian Christians "think and behave no differently from anyone else,"[29] warrants greater charity of other faiths toward Latter-day Saints and more candid introspection of their own record and standing before God before they design to attack the faith of their LDS neighbors. While Latter-day Saints are not perfect, they are earnestly striving to emulate the example of the Savior and apply His teachings. The fruits of the restored Gospel of Jesus Christ testify to its truthfulness, and all are invited to come and see.

[1] Johnson, Eric. 10 Things Christians Can Learn from the Mormons. www.mrm.org/articles/10-things.html.
[2] Matthew 3:8,10
[3] Luke 6:46
[4] Matthew 7:26-27
[5] Matthew 7:16
[6] Luke 6:43-44
[7] Hebrews 4:15
[8] Barna, George. "Religious Beliefs Vary Widely By Denomination." Barna Research Group. 25 June 2001. www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=92&Reference=B.
[9] Barna, George. "Beliefs: Trinity, Satan." Barna Research 2001. www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PageCategory.asp?CategoryID=6.
[10] Barna, George. http://barna.org, 2001
[11] Christianity Today. 11 September 1970.
[12] Cloud, David. "Way of Life Encyclopedia of the Bible & Christianity." Way of Life Publishers. 560 p. 1993.
[13] Cloud, David. "Way of Life Encyclopedia of the Bible & Christianity." Way of Life Publishers. 560 p. 1993.
[14] Hadden, Jeffrey. 1968 University of Washington study.
[15] Ephesians 4:14
[16] Barna, George. "Americans Are Most Likely to Base Truth on Feelings." Barna Research Group. 12 February 2002. www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=106&Reference=C.
[17] Barna, George. "Practical Outcomes Replace Biblical Principles As the Moral Standard." 10 September 2001. www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=97&Reference=F.
[18] Barna, George. "Protestants, Catholics and Mormons Reflect Diverse Levels of Religious Activity." 9 July 2001. www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=93&Reference=B.
[19] Barna, George. "Practical Outcomes Replace Biblical Principles As the Moral Standard." 10 September 2001. www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=97&Reference=F.
[20] Finer, Lawrence B. "Trends in Premarital Sex in the United States, 1954-2003," Public Health Reports 122 (January-February 2007) 73-78.
[21] Barna, George. "Religious Beliefs Vary Widely By Denomination." Barna Research Group. 25 June 2001. www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=92&Reference=B.
[22] Top, Brent L, and Bruce A. Chadwick. "Helping Teens Stay Strong," Ensign, March. 1999, p. 27.
[23] Top, Brent L, and Bruce A. Chadwick. "Helping Teens Stay Strong," Ensign, March. 1999, p. 27.
[24] Albrecht, Stan, and Timothy B. Heaton. "Secularization, Higher Education, and Religiosity." In Latter-day Saint Social Life: Social Research on the LDS Church and its Members, ed. James T. Duke (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 1998), p. 306-07.
[25] 2 Nephi 28:4
[26] Barna, George. "Most American Christians do not believe that Satan or the Holy Spirit exist." http://barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirtuality/260-most-american-christians-do-not-believe-that-satan-or-the-holy-spirit-exis . 10 April 2009. Accessed 18 July 2010.
[27] 4 Nephi 1:27
[28] Jacob 4:17
[29] Barna, George. The Second Coming of the Church, p. 7.