

## *Having a Form of Godliness*

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The late Samuel Johnson once said, “There’s nothing like an imminent hanging to concentrate the mind upon a single idea!” For the past several weeks my mind has focused upon a central theme which I would like to share with you today. Inasmuch as speakers generally learn more than listeners, I need to improve my life in a number of ways, so I’ve chosen to speak to the topic “Having a Form of Godliness.”

Above the desk in my office are a number of photographs which are very significant to me. One of them is a picture of the Provo Temple taken at night. The illuminated golden spire of that temple is a light upon a hill which cannot be hid (see Matthew 5:14). When I look at that photo, I behold a beautiful building with unpretentious architectural lines. But within the walls of that temple, ordinances are performed which have eternal significance. Indeed, the lives of millions in an unseen world have been forever influenced by the ordinances performed therein. Instruction is given which provides us with an eternal blueprint, a spiritual life-script which, if followed carefully, will help us return to the presence of a loving Heavenly Father. I keep this photo nearby to remind me of covenants I have renewed in that holy place.

Beneath the picture of the Provo Temple is a photograph of another building, an edifice embellished with nearly every imaginable form of ornamentation. This building is a virtual temple of art, the Vienna Museum of Art History. I keep this photograph near to remind me of some wonderful experiences which my family and the family of Professors Garold and Norma Davis, and 30 beautiful, inquisitive BYU students had in Austria just a year ago. This massive, ornate structure adorned in a neo-Baroque style houses more than a thousand of the world’s greatest paintings and other works of art. In many respects it embodies much that is “virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy” (Thirteenth Article of Faith). Even devoid of its masterworks, this building would be a work of art in its own right. The grandeur of its architectural symmetry, its beautifully sculptured marble columns, and its ornate ceilings evoke feelings of awe and appreciation for the talents of the builders and those who gave of their means to help construct this beautiful building.

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On one occasion as I visited this inspiring museum, I reflected upon the words of the Savior to a boy prophet in the spring of 1820:

*They draw near to me with their lips . . . having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.*  
[Joseph Smith 2:19; see 2 Timothy 3:5]

Each time I revisited this museum or a concert hall or the famous Vienna State Opera House, I felt inspired by the talents of others, all of whom lived as best they could within the light they'd been given. But in each of these buildings returned the reverberating theme "[they have] a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof."

And then, suddenly, I was struck with a three-hundred kilovolt question: It's wonderful that you belong to a Church which has a form of godliness and also the power thereof, but what of you and your *personal* life? Bibbed and tuckered in your white shirt and Sunday suit, with your spit-shined shoes and your missionary haircut, Brother Condie, do you perhaps sometimes have a *form* of godliness, but does your personal life really reflect the *power* of the priesthood of God?

Like Ebenezer Scrooge on Christmas Eve, I felt a pallor of gloom sweep my soul as I reflected upon the many times I had exercised my priesthood unworthily and the times I had partaken of the sacrament without sincere intentions of renewing covenants. I retrieved painful memories of having reproved others many times with sharpness without having been moved upon by the Holy Ghost (see D&C 121:43). I recalled the conscience-wracking consequences of covering my sins in an interview when the bishop asked me just one question: "Have you been a good kid lately?" I replied yes, but in my heart I knew, and I knew the Lord knew, that a more careful interview would have yielded some soul-searching signs of wavering worthiness.

Brothers and sisters, for one of the few times in my life, I gained a glimpse into the depths of my own soul, and I didn't like everything I saw. Like Enos, the son of Jacob, I have observed through personal experience the egocentricity of sin. As Enos went hunting and his soul began to hunger for the things of the Spirit, his first recorded thoughts were upon his *own* soul. It was not until he had prayed all day long and into the night and had received a confirmation of forgiveness of his *own* sins that his thoughts were turned to his brethren, the Nephites, and then to the Lamanites (see Enos). Through personal experience I have found that when one does not have the Spirit of the Lord, any service within the Church becomes extremely arduous. Perhaps David described the predicament best when he wrote in Psalm 88:15, "While I suffer thy terrors I am distracted." One of the Brethren described this phenomenon as "going through life serving the Lord in such a way as not to offend the devil."

On the other hand, when our spirits are in tune, the powers of heaven can and do distill upon us, drenching us with joy in serving the Lord through service to others. It is then that our confidence waxes strong before God and the Holy Ghost becomes our constant companion (see D&C 121:45–46).

### **King David**

There are few examples more poignant than the life of King David in illustrating the corrosion of confidence in the sight of the Lord. As a naïve shepherd boy whose thoughts were garnished with virtue, filled with faith and confidence, he slew Goliath while his compatriots cowered in the background. As a poet-king, anointed to that position under the hands of the prophet Samuel, he exemplified a form of godliness as he wrote of green pastures, still waters, and paths of righteousness. Filled with faith he humbly, yet confidently, proclaimed:

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.* [Psalms 23:4, emphasis added]

In his very next recorded psalm he asserted that those who shall ascend unto the hill of the Lord must have “clean hands, and a pure heart” (Psalms, 24:3–4).

But some time later, after becoming the king of all Israel, David, the shepherd boy grown tall, “lifted up his soul into vanity”; and, following the lusts of a heart no longer pure, he committed a sin for which forgiveness is difficult, and then compounded it by covertly committing an even greater sin.

The psalms of David provide us with an excellent barometer of his spirituality just as our own personal journals reflect our own spiritual strengths and weaknesses. Thus, it is of interest to read David’s journal entry shortly after his encounter with Bathsheba. Wracked with unrelenting remorse he wrote in Psalm 51:

*Have mercy upon me, O God . . . blot out my transgressions.*

*Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me.* [vss. 1, 11]

No longer possessed of faith which fears no evil, David’s green pastures had become deserts of despair. Without divine guidance, how was he now going to lead Israel and defend her borders? In 1 Chronicles 21, we learn that Satan placed in David’s heart the desire to take a census of all his people. His chief commander, Joab, was a bit distressed at David’s request, for had not God always helped his chosen people in battle, regardless of their numbers? Hadn’t Jehovah trimmed Gideon’s troops from 32,000 to 300 to prove that it was the Lord’s power and *not* sheer numbers which was responsible for the victory over the Midianites? (see Judges 7). Had not David the shephard boy been a majority of one

in single-handedly defeating the Goliath-led Philistines? Little wonder that Joab questioned the king’s sudden striving to find safety in numbers.

President Harold B. Lee, upon becoming the prophet of the Church in July 1972, said:

*The safety of the Church lies in the members keeping the commandments.* [Church News, 15 July 1972, p. 3]

And what of the safety of a nation? Is our nation any less exempt from the blessings of obedience and the consequences of disobedience? Were the matter not so serious, I could chuckle at the similarities between David’s census of the Israelites and our own nation’s compulsive counting of nuclear warheads. How many missiles does it take to protect a nation in which abortion is currently the most frequently performed operation in hospitals and clinics throughout the land? (see *Statistical Abstracts of the United States*, Washington, D.C., U. S. Department of Commerce, 1980, pp. 69–71). Is national security possible for a country whose citizens are addicted by the millions to movies, magazines, and television programs which vividly portray Satan’s smutty smorgasbord on a daily basis? In my humble view, parity in nuclear numbers may numb our fears, but it is a sad substitute for spiritual strength and security.

Sometimes, even within the Church, an undue concern with numbers can impair human relationships as people become pawns in a quantitative quest for perfection. But what of *qualitative* perfection? Do our statistical reports sometimes have a *form* of godliness devoid of godly power? Elder Dean L. Larsen reminds us that

*the qualities of the spirit are susceptible to assessment, but they must be assessed by spiritual means* [Dean L. Larsen “Some Thoughts on Goal-Setting,” *Ensign*, February 1981, pp. 62–65]

Paul's counsel to the Corinthians may be helpful to us in this regard. Said Paul:

*The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.*  
[2 Corinthians 3:6]

I suppose the secular equivalent to this statement is the observation of Roy Frances that "too much rigor often leads to mortis."

### Means and Goals

I make no claim to being a theologian, but with my limited knowledge and perspective, it appears to me that in the eternal economy of things, the methods we use to achieve our eternal goals are often as important as the goals themselves.

In the fourth chapter of Moses we learn of the council in heaven wherein Satan proposed what appears to be a very laudable goal:

*I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it.* [Moses 4:1]

Now, what could possibly be wrong with such a lofty goal, to absolutely assure eternal salvation to all mankind? The Lord himself answered this question:

*Because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, . . . I caused that he should be cast down.* [Moses 4:3]

In other words, exaltation is *not* to be purchased by the surrender of one's free agency, but rather through the Atonement and "by grace after all we can do" (2 Nephi 25:23). This latter step involves the proper use of our free agency, not its enforcement by others.

In the fourth chapter of Ephesians the apostle Paul explained that the Church was organized (Ephesians 4:11) "for the perfecting of the saints" (Ephesians 4:12). And how is this per-

fecting process to proceed? By "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15).

Alma gave his son, Shiblon, similar advice prior to his departure to win souls for the kingdom. Said Alma:

*Use boldness, but not overbearance; and also see that ye bridle all your passions.* [Alma 38:12]

As we continually contemplate this vital relationship between mortal means and eternal goals, it may be well to reflect upon the fact that the Savior called Peter and Andrew to become "fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19), *not* hunters. Whereas hunters pursue their quarry, assailing it with slings and arrows, the fishers of man are to use the methods of "persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, and love unfeigned" (D&C 121:41). It is well to remember also that when we are fishing, the fish must take some of the initiative in order to swim into the net, and therein one finds an eternal meaning in one's life within the gospel net.

### Sunday Neurosis

In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, the Viennese psychiatrist Viktor Frankl discusses individuals whose lives have no sense of meaning. He refers to this empty feeling or existential vacuum as a "Sunday neurosis," a kind of depression

*which afflicts people who become aware of the lack of content in their lives when the rush of the busy week is over and the void within themselves becomes manifest.* [New York: Pocket Books, 1963, p. 169]

In other words, who are we and what are we on Sundays when we don't go to work to perform the roles of accountant, electrician, truck driver, beautician, or nurse? Or who are we after we have been released as bishop or Relief Society president or elders quorum president? Or, with the new consolidated meeting

schedule, who are we on Sundays when we're not in church? Is the Sabbath a day of spiritual regeneration or one of emptiness and boredom, devoid of celestial content?

### Sunday Nostalgia

One Sunday this past spring I emerged from a priests quorum meeting in one of the wards in our stake. I had been touched by the lesson given to a pride of prospective missionaries, young lions preparing to preach the gospel. The adviser's quiet, yet firm, testimony reminded me once again that the gospel *really* is true. As I journeyed home that day, I felt no Sunday neurosis; it was more of a feeling of Sabbath nostalgia, a sense of longing for a celestial home. As I drove homeward, a familiar message found expression in song:

*Yet ofttimes a secret something  
Whispered, "You're a stranger here."  
And I felt that I had wandered  
From a more exalted sphere.*  
[Eliza R. Snow, *Hymns*, no. 139]

Our beloved prophet, President Kimball, has given us the solution to resolving feelings of emptiness in our lives:

*When we are engaged in the service of our fellowmen, not only do our deeds assist them, but we put our own problems in a fresher perspective. When we concern ourselves more with others, there is less time to be concerned with ourselves. In the midst of serving, there is the promise of Jesus, that by losing ourselves, we find ourselves (see Matthew 10:39).*  
...

*The more we serve our fellowmen in appropriate ways, the more substance there is to our souls. . . . Indeed, it is easier to "find" ourselves because there is so much more of us to find! ["Small Acts of Service," *Ensign*, December 1974, p. 2]*

I hope those of you who are on a diet will take the figurative meaning of that statement.

### Serious but Not Hopeless

The Viennese social critic, Karl Kraus, wrote a biting satire on the glorification of war in his play *The Last Days of Mankind* (*Die letzten Tage der Menschheit*, Vienna, 1922). At the outbreak of World War I, Kraus described the situation in Berlin as "serious but not hopeless, whereas in Vienna things are hopeless but not serious."

The Viennese took their operas and their arts very seriously. In the kaffee houses of Vienna, fighting was not uncommon. And what was the source of these heated debates? Whether Wagner was a greater composer than Brahms! But war—that was different. Music should be taken seriously, but not war. That was a matter of pomp and glory and good, heroic fun. Little mention was made of death and destruction. "It was perhaps the only instance in history of an army that went off to war and never came back" (Richard Rickett, *Austrian History*, Vienna: Georg Prachner, 1966, p. 122).

I suspect that sometimes our personal lives are like Vienna. We take the wrong things seriously and make light of sacred covenants which should be taken most seriously. Martin Duberman's description of the "bit" technique illustrates this problem, and I quote:

*The "bit" technique goes like this: At all costs one must avoid the stigma of being too serious; to do so, you stick a self-mocking label on any scene in which you might be caught displaying deep emotion. Thus: I don't want to do the "engaged-couple bit," but—or "I don't want to do the "expectant-father bit," but—. Doing "bits" with people is the "in" way of establishing fellowship. They allow one to show affection while ridiculing it, to be sentimental while appearing tough. [Martin Duberman, *New York Times Book Review*, 19 September 1965, pp. 60–61]*

Perhaps King Saul did the "sacrifice bit" by not taking the word of the prophet Samuel seriously. You will recall that Samuel had

commanded Saul to slay all the Amalekites and all their animals. When Saul returned home from battle, Samuel was distraught to discover that Saul had brought several animals back with him, supposedly to sacrifice them upon his arrival home. Saul learned the hard way that “to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams” (1 Samuel 15:22).

I hope you youth of Zion will not engage in the “dress-standards bit” or the “missionary bit” or the “temple-marriage bit” or any other “bits” which may have a form of godliness but deny the power thereof. When we make covenants in the temple of the Lord, they are to be valid for time and all eternity—period.

Consider the following practices, some of which have a form of godliness and some of which have both the form and the power:

Do we appreciate the difference between fasting and skipping breakfast?

Is there a crucial distinction in our lives between praying and saying prayers?

Can we discriminate between music which edifies and that which debases? The amplification of three basic guitar cords through sixteen-inch speakers still begs the question of whether some music is good and loud or just loud.

Do we appreciate the distinction between consecration and contribution?

Can we discern between obedience based on faith and obedience based on fear? Elder Theodore M. Burton provided some very interesting insights in this regard, and I quote from his general conference address of 1974:

*Some members of the Church have said to me, “Why should we keep a store of food on hand? If a real emergency came in this lawless world, a neighbor would simply come with his gun and take it from us. What would you do if a person came and demanded your food?” I replied that I would share whatever I had with him, and he wouldn’t have to use a gun to obtain that assistance either. “I wouldn’t,” replied one man. “I have a gun, and I wouldn’t hesitate to use it to defend my family.*

*Anyone would have to kill me first in order to get food away from me! After all, they bring their own misery on themselves by not being prepared!”*

Elder Burton, with a twinkle in his eye, continued: “Well, one way to solve this problem is to convert your neighbors to become obedient Latter-day Saints with their own supply of food.” (“The Power of Elijah,” *Ensign*, April 1974, p. 62). I suppose that gunpowder would also keep the boll weevil out of the flour.

Of course, another solution to this “draw-bridge mentality” is obedience to the counsel of the Lord: “If ye are prepared ye shall not fear (D&C 38:30) and “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40).

### **Activity vs. Devotion**

Can we discern a difference between Church activity and devotion?

It has been interesting to note the extremely widespread use of the words *active* and *inactive* to describe members of the Church. If people show up for most of their meetings, we call them active. On the other hand, if they miss most of their meetings, we label them inactive. Over the years it has been interesting to observe how many so-called “active” Saints seldom contribute to the ward budget or attend the temple or render much help on the welfare farm. By contrast, there are Saints whose neighbors call them “inactive” but who frequent the stake farm and also contribute generously to the ward budget and building fund.

It seems that the words *active* and *inactive* don’t adequately capture the dimensions of devotion, consecration, commitment, and godliness. For example, the sons of Eli regularly officiated in the temple despite the fact that they were impure and desecrated the sacrifices of those who had come to worship (1 Samuel 2–3). By today’s statistical standards, they were “active” because they showed up every day.

The importance of discerning the contents beneath the form was brought forcefully home to a shopper in an Austrian supermarket. He was perplexed to observe two cans of mushrooms of identical size with different labels and very discrepant prices. He asked one of the clerks what the difference was between the cans of mushrooms for 13 shillings and the ones for 26 shillings. With a smile, the clerk replied, "The ones for 26 are guaranteed not to be poisonous."

### **Power vs. Form**

There are many organizations and activities which compete for our time, our means, and our loyalty. Many of these are what Robert Bellah ("Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus*, 1967, pp. 1–21) calls "civil religion," for they have the form of religion. For example, there are civic organizations and learned societies which have a hierarchical structure complete with high councils. They solicit contributions in proportion to one's income and even hold general conferences. Their purposes are generally lofty, and membership in such organizations is to be encouraged. But after all is said and done, in an eternal perspective, more is often *said* than *done*, for the priesthood of God is absent from such organizations.

Even as great an organization as the Boy Scouts of America, with its inspiring Scout Law and inspired motto, must recognize that it is the power and authority of the Aaronic Priesthood—not the authority of an Eagle Scout—by which young priests bless sacred emblems.

The training and self-discipline of athletic competition does much to remind us that our bodies are temples for our spirits (1 Corinthians 3:16). For some, however, interest in athletics, either as participant or spectator, takes on a sacred aura which has a form of religious devotion. But what of the power of God? A million-dollar baseball contract pales in comparison to the priesthood promises contained in the oath

and covenant found in section 84 of the Doctrine and Covenants.

As a rabid boxing fan in my high school years, I was dismayed when Gene Fullmer, the "Mormon Mauler," lost his bid to be the middle-weight champion of the world, and I asked my stake patriarch how the Lord could allow Sugar Ray Robinson to beat Gene Fullmer. His reply was succinct, "I don't think the Lord caught the match."

Patriotism, misused and misdirected, may also assume a form of godliness devoid of godly power as we have seen in Ireland and Iran. As we visited the Nazi concentration camp at Mauthausen, our souls were subdued by this memorial to the high costs of hatred and the wreckage of patriotism gone awry. What began with exclusionary ethnic epithets grew into vicious vandalism and eventually ended in mass murder. After that visit, I made a promise, with God as my witness, that I was going to refrain from telling ethnic jokes and that I was going to try harder to substitute charity for criticism. I'm still wrestling with that promise.

I fear that many of us, like Saul, are more willing to sacrifice other people's possessions than to sacrifice our own sins. This was the sacrifice which the father of King Lamoni made when he prayed:

*God . . . I will give away all my sins to know thee.*  
[Alma 22:18]

And this kind of sacrifice is precisely the price that must be paid to know him and to enter his presence.

Even King David, in the depths of despair, realized better than Saul, his predecessor, what kind of sacrifices the Lord requires. In Psalm 51 he wrote:

*For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering.*

*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart.* [Psalms 51:16–17]

I sense that sometimes as Latter-day Saints we are often too ready to sacrifice and too slow to obey. I sometimes question how much of what we call sacrifice really constitutes a sacrifice on our part. For example, if we invest several thousand dollars in long-term savings certificates with the intent of gaining a rich return on our long-term investments, do we ever refer to such investments as a sacrifice? I've heard of stockbrokers, realtors, and investment counselors, but I've never heard of sacrificial account executives.

Then what of financial contributions to the kingdom of God? And what of the time we spend in preparing Primary lessons, singing in ward choirs, or taking a troop of Boy Scouts to Camp Poison Sumac for a week's retreat on the shores of Mosquito Lake? Do these contributions constitute a major sacrifice, or are they eternal investments in a paradisiacal portfolio promising divine dividends that "all that [our] Father hath shall be given unto [us]"? (D&C 84:38).

In section 84 we learn from the words of the Lord that

*without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh.* [D&C 84:21]

It is in the ordinances of the priesthood, not in numbers, that the power of godliness is manifest. And what of the daughters of Zion who do not hold the priesthood?

### **Motherhood and Priesthood**

In the book *Priesthood and Church Government*, Elder John A. Widtsoe poses a profound question: "Why should God give his sons a power that is denied his daughters? He then proceeds to answer his own question:

*This division of responsibility is for a wise and noble purpose. Our Father in Heaven has bestowed upon His daughters a gift of equal importance and power; the "gift" referred to is that of motherhood. Woman may claim other activity, but motherhood should take precedence in her entire scheme of life. . . . Our Father even chose a daughter of Eve to be the earth-mother and guide of His Only Begotten Son, and thus honored womanhood for all time and eternity!* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1963, pp. 84–85]

In the divine justice and loving mercy of an omniscient, loving, and wise Heavenly Father, all women will be eligible for the blessings of priesthood ordinances, and those women who are denied the power of motherhood in this life will receive eternal compensation if they remain true and faithful. Of that modern prophets have borne witness (see Harold B. Lee, *Ye Are the Light of the World*, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974, p. 292).

### **Godliness and Perfection**

In closing, I should like to speak briefly about the relationship between godliness and perfection. In a fourteen-stake fireside in June of last year, Elder Bruce R. McConkie identified as fallacious the belief that we must be perfect to gain salvation. I was heartened by his address, for I have counseled with many students who have disclosed their distress in having failed to reach perfection by the second semester of their junior year. Or they are discouraged because they failed to return home from a mission perfect. Or they were married in the temple to a "perfect" companion, when they themselves were not perfect. (Those of you who have perfect roommates know what I'm talking about.) Elder McConkie's statement is true: We will not achieve perfection in this life. The Savior himself is the only one to accomplish this goal upon this earth. But if we are to become as the Savior, and he has commanded us to strive to do just that (see



Matthew 5:48, 3 Nephi 12:48), we would do well to follow the admonition of Moroni in the final verses of the Book of Mormon:

*Come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ; and if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in nowise deny the power of God. [Moroni 10:32]*

The pathway to perfection will always be punctuated with painful and unpleasant events. After all, Lehi instructed Jacob that “it must needs be that there is an opposition in all things.” (2 Nephi 2:11). He didn’t say “there could be” or “there might be” or even that “there would be” opposition. He said “it *must* needs be that there is an opposition in all things.” Opposition is indispensable to the plan of salvation and for the eternal experiences and growth afforded therein.

The pathway to perfection and godhood begins with the acquisition of such godly attributes as those described in section 4: “faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, brotherly kindness, godliness, charity, humility, [and] diligence” (D&C 4:6). In our personal strivings and in assisting those who are lost or faltering to obtain the power of godliness, may we keep in mind the Savior’s thrice-given injunction to Peter: “Feed my sheep,” “feed my lambs,” “feed my sheep.” It seems significant to me that the Lord said “*Feed* my sheep,” not “*herd* them.” Means are often as important as goals.

It is my prayer that each of us may leave this gathering this day with a firmer resolve to cultivate the attributes of godliness, having both the form of godliness *and* the power thereof. Many things in our lives are important but not true. There are other things, unfortunately, that are often true but not important. I bear you my testimony that the restored Church of Jesus Christ is not just true, but important—a matter of spiritual urgency, a matter of eternal life or death. Of this I bear witness in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.