



Type: Magazine Article

Nephite Philosophy of Life

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Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 30, No. 11 (September 1927)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Page(s): 955–959

Abstract: This article claims that Nephite leaders and teachers possessed a distinct philosophy regarding life. For instance, God demonstrates an impartiality towards the human race, the Holy Ghost is available to direct one's life, the principle of freedom is attached to obedience to divine law, an eternal view of things is advanced as opposed to the limited temporal view that mankind is prone to take.

NEPHITE PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

BY JOHN HENRY EVANS

LINCOLN'S SIMPLER CODE OF LIFE

Abraham Lincoln believed that he should be honest in everything he thought and said and did—honest with himself, never to think he believed what he did not, always facing the facts of life as they were uncovered to him, and being open-minded four ways; honest with his fellow men, never trying to mislead them in their thinking or their conduct, nor cheating them in any money transaction; honest with God, never taken too much credit to himself, keeping his conscience clear for the next life, and refusing to lay the wrong treasures in the chest.

This was his philosophy of life. A very simple one, to be sure, but one that worked in the most complex situations. Instead of having one rule or principle for this situation and another for that, he had one rule or principle for all occasions—be honest. It was easy to remember, and easy to apply. And it was always safe.

Now, the Nephites also had a philosophy of life—the Nephites, I mean, that did the thinking for the nation, the leaders. They probably would be surprised to know that it was called by this high-sounding name. Maybe they were not at all conscious of having one. Yet they had one, none the less, and a simple one it was, too, as simple as Abraham Lincoln's. It was this, Do what God tells you.

WHERE NEPHITE PHILOSOPHY IS TO BE FOUND

I do not say that the philosophy of life of the Nephites is to be got from this or that passage in the Book of Mormon, for it is not. You must bear this fact in mind as you read the present chapter, otherwise you may be misled in your mind and be disappointed. Rather is that philosophy to be gathered from the whole spirit of the Nephite record as that spirit is represented in the greater leaders of the people.

THE GROWTH OF A LITTLE CHILD

When a child comes into the world and lies there on the pillow a mere bit of red pulp, it is a very helpless creature—the most helpless, in fact, of all animals. Its organs are not at all developed in their uses. Indeed, it can hardly do anything besides move and cry. It cannot see, or hear, or taste, much less tell the difference between what is right and wrong. Gradually its physical and mental and moral qualities come into use, and grow, but so very slowly as to require a much longer infancy than any other animal. This is because man is endowed with reason, instead of instinct, as a principle of conduct in life.

Now, suppose a child were left to do as it pleased. Suppose no one cared whether it lived or died; whether, if it lived, it became a well developed man or woman in body and mind. Most likely it would die, and not live. For, when it was able to walk and to be attracted by a flame, it would rush to it and perhaps be burned to death, and there end everything. Or maybe it would be poisoned by a plant that looked wholesome but that had the sting of death in it. Or, again, it might contract a habit of conduct that would weaken its character and lessen its influence for good in the world. At every point its life, physical and moral, would be endangered by something or other.

But children are not left thus to themselves. On the contrary, they are guarded from all harm to body and spirit, and hedged about on all sides, by parents that love them beyond anything else on earth. "This," they are told, "will harm you, that will do you good. That stove is hot and will burn your fingers. That precipice is high, and a fall from it will mean your death. Or, doing this will develop your mind, while doing that will weaken it. Or, this line of conduct will certainly lead to such-and-such an end." On all hands are the finger-posts pointing the way to life and success, here and hereafter.

And the children respect and follow the judgment of their parents. Why? Because the parents have gone over the same road, and know the uses of things along the way. The main thing about an intelligent father and mother is that, besides being tremendously concerned about their children, they often know the end of life from the beginning. Experience has taught them this. Not only do they know that an apple, let go by the hand, will fall to the ground unless caught in the meantime, but they know also that all falsifying has a tendency to repeat itself till lying becomes a habit, which, if not checked, may result in a total eclipse of character. And children who do any thinking at all for themselves credit their parents' word, because they know their parents have lived long enough to see the hidden causes of lying produce effects that may be seen of all men.

GOD THE FATHER OF ALL MANKIND

The Nephites believed that man holds the same relationship to God that the child does to its earthly parents. God was to them the Father of *all* men—not only of the great and powerful, the intelligent, the free, the white; the gifted, but likewise of the humble, the illiterate, the bondsman, and the colored. He is the Father, not alone of those who lived in ancient and favored nations, but also of those who are alive today and in the weakest and most despised nations. *All* are his children, according to Nephite teachings as revealed in the Book of Mormon.

And the Nephites, more than most other peoples, know the love of God for his children. This is a theme that runs through the record of these people from Lehi to Mormon and Moroni, like a silken

thread unbroken. If you wish to learn how deep this knowledge of the love God has for his sons and daughters was in the minds of the Nephites, all you have to do is to read those unparalleled scenes in which Jesus administered to these people after his resurrection. In Palestine he healed an occasional sick person that came to him unasked, but in America he requested the multitude to bring him their sick, and he healed every one. In the land of the Jew he wept in the presence of a chosen few of his disciples; in the land of the Nephite he was not ashamed to shed tears before great concourses of people. "O Lord God Almighty!" exclaims the patriarch Lehi in a beautiful passage, "thy throne is high in the heavens, and thy power and goodness and mercy are over all the inhabitants of the earth; and because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish." The Nephites, therefore, appear to have had the most implicit confidence in the love of God for his children.

Nor did they have any less faith and trust in his knowledge and wisdom to guide his children in safety. Just as the parent, being older and more experienced, sees farther into causes and effects than the child, so, they felt, to compare small things with great, is God's vision deeper and longer than man's. Time is only a part of eternity, and God lives in eternity, and has passed through time. Man is immortal, too, in his spirit, being "without beginning of days or end of years." Death is but an incident in man's real eternity, of which the Lord seems not to take any great account. He looks upon man, not in the little segment called time, but in the whole span of man's life. And so, when he speaks to his children here below, it is in this larger view of their lives, not the smaller. Hence, the seed may be sown in mortality, and the harvest, for good or ill, be reaped a million years hence, in immortality, just as we may find the cause laid in our childhood of which the effect becomes apparent in our late manhood or womanhood. That we do not see the effect of a given cause, is not because there is none, for it may be we do not live long enough in this life to see it. We are too short-visioned to perceive it—that is all. None knew this with greater certainty than the Nephites.

GOD USES A MEANS TO OBTAIN GOODNESS

There is one difference, however, between the manner in which God induces mankind to follow his will and the way in which an earthly father wins obedience from his children, and the difference is very marked. What is it?

Your father or mother points out to you the difference between what is right and what is wrong in conduct, shows you the consequences that will follow on the heels of your choice, and then leaves you to your own guidance and resources, your own strength or weakness. Sometimes, in the case of smaller children, punishment may be meted out, or a reward held out, as an inducement to resist

or to perform. But that is all that can be hoped for by any earthly parent—that the son or daughter will see the point and have strength of purpose enough to pursue the right course.

In the case of our heavenly Father, though, there is a positive influence, a vital force, at his command that works in man to bring personal righteousness. This power is the holy Spirit. It is the light that lighteth every one that cometh into the world. It teaches him the distinction between right and wrong, between the higher and the lower. After his baptism he receives the “gift of the Holy Ghost,” which not only leads him into truth, but stiffens his will in temptation and urges him always “to keep to the right”. It becomes in him, through the whisperings of the still, small voice, a power making for righteousness in the world. And this first and foremost aid to goodness, the Nephites believed in with all their heart.

OBEDIENCE AND FREEDOM

Now, if you know God and love him with all your heart and mind and strength, you will, according to the teachings of the Book of Mormon, cheerfully submit yourself to his guidance in everything. That is the secret of power and goodness in the Nephites whose character we have depicted for us in the volume that has come down to us. This was their philosophy of life. And they sought diligently to impose this philosophy upon the whole people, Lamanites, as well as Nephites, with more or less success.

Nor did such men as we have considered in these pages, men far above the average in intellectual power, think that, in yielding up their will to God, they were limiting or giving up their own personal freedom of thought or action.

They recognized the principle of free agency as at the very foundation of life. Says the patriarch Lehi, “Men are free according to the flesh—free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great mediation of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil, who seeketh that all men might be miserable like himself.”

They recognized, also, that goodness means freedom and that evil is synonymous with bondage. The slave in spiritual things is he who breaks the law of life, whether it be a physical law or a moral law. As long as he lives above the law, it does not apply to him, and he is free. But the moment he comes in conflict with the law, any law, he is curtailed in his personal liberty. That is the nature of things as they are at present constituted in this universe of ours. The spirit of the Book of Mormon leads us to obedience as a means of retaining freedom.

A clear notion is apt to be a true notion, just as a vague, misty conception is likely to be false in some essential respect. Light and truth go together. But, if so, then the philosophy of life of the Nephites bears one of the marks of being true—it is crystal clear.

There is no indefiniteness about it, no obscurity, no shadow. On the contrary, it is well defined, bold and clear in its outline. Matching this clearness of vision in the Nephite mind, this penetration into the heart of things spiritual, is the steadiness of purpose with which the best of that race pursued their ideas of life's purpose. It is not the twinkling of a far-distant star, but the steady shining of the resplendent sun, unobscured by any cloud. Like a sailor in the midst of dangerous rocks, they kept their eyes fixed on the lighthouse gleam, being sure that, following it, they would safely reach the other shore.

THE SEGMENT OF THE CIRCLE

Let us see if we cannot make this larger point of view furnished by the Nephite philosophy of life a little clearer by a graphic representation. Suppose you draw a circle on a sheet of paper, and make it as large as you can. This may stand for eternity. Suppose, now, you mark off anywhere on the circle, say, a half-inch space. This may represent time. All this is pitifully inadequate, to be sure, especially the circle, which does not properly show life as a going-on; but it will answer our purpose, if we are not too critical.

What difference does it make whether we plan for that little segment or for the whole circle? All the difference in the world. In the one case, that of the segment, we shall probably have to undo much of our work, just as those who come after us may have to do with our plans for a great city or a nation, if we have not looked ahead enough to the city or the nation's long life and growth under changed conditions from those under which we are now living. In the other case, that of the wide circle, we shall very likely have to undo little of our work, because we have considered the fuller views, just as Brigham Young did when he laid out Salt Lake City, with its wide streets.

Surely a young man or a young woman can plan more intelligently if he or she takes in the whole view of life, including old age, than if only a few years of the present are kept in mind in the planning. Just so, the Nephites must have thought, one can plan better if one considers the whole of life, eternity as well as time, than if one looks only at time. Other things being equal, the longer look ahead bespeaks the greater intelligence.

The fuller view these Nephites had, whose lives are touched upon in this book. It was their philosophy of life, their finger-post along the way to the life hereafter, the light in which they were able to plan effectively for themselves and for others who would follow their lead. And they believed in it as implicitly as they did in the things they handled with their hands or saw with their bodily eyes. Not for a moment did they allow themselves to forget it or to lay it aside. Nothing could induce them to do that—not riches, not power, not the honors of men, not even the threat of death itself, which they came to look upon as a mere incident in the life of the soul. It was a veritable living on the heights!