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## Lehi and the Covenant of the Promised Land: A Modern Appraisal

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## **Lehi and the Covenant of the Promised Land: A Modern Appraisal**

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**Alan K. Parrish**

**L**ehi, a prophet in the streets of Jerusalem, was patriarch to the family that comprised the major Book of Mormon migration to the new promised land on the American continent. As Moses led the children of Israel along a course set out by a miraculous cloud, Lehi also led his children along a course set out by a miraculous director to a promised land. There Lehi settled his family and sought to fulfill the divine covenant of that land. It was to be the divine inheritance for his seed and for certain others to whom God would extend the same blessing (2 Nephi 1:3-7). Along with stipulating the promises and terms of the covenant, Lehi gives passionate warnings to his seed.

First, not only was this land given by covenant and consecration to Lehi and his descendants, and to all others who would be led out of other countries by the hand of the Lord, but it was to be kept from the knowledge of other nations so they would not overrun it (v. 8). Second, the migrations to this land would be under the direction of the Lord; “there shall none come

into this land save they shall be brought by the hand of the Lord” (v. 6). Third, at the heart of the covenant is the promise that this land “shall be a land of liberty unto them” (v. 7). Lehi even promised that they would be kept from their enemies and opponents, that they would neither be subjected to captivity nor molested by any enemy (vv. 7-9). Fourth, those who received the covenant were given a continuing promise that they would “prosper in the land” provided that they kept the commandments of God (v. 20).

The land, its liberty, its protection, and its prosperity as covenant blessings were conditioned upon the inhabitants’ keeping the Lord’s commandments. The Lord warned Lehi, saying,

But behold, when the time cometh that they shall dwindle in unbelief, after they have received so great blessings from the hand of the Lord . . . having been brought by his infinite goodness into this precious land of promise—behold, I say, if the day shall come that they will reject the Holy one of Israel, the true Messiah, their Redeemer and their God, behold, the judgments of him that is just shall rest upon them. Yea, he will bring other nations unto them, and he will give unto them power, and he will take away from them the lands of their possessions, and he will cause them to be scattered and smitten (2 Nephi 1:10-11).

Centuries earlier, Jared and his brother had been directed by the Lord to lead a similar migration of faithful people to the same promised land and had received the same covenant blessing. Their story began in the days of the tower of Babel. They knew the Lord’s intent to disperse the people and confuse their tongues. They determined they would be faithful to the Lord (Ether 1:38), and when they called upon him, he accepted their faithfulness and responded to their pleas. He came and spoke to their faithfulness and responded to their pleas.

He also described this land and its covenant promises to the brother of Jared. Note the similarities between this description and the one he gave Lehi.

Whoso should possess this land of promise, from that time henceforth and forever, should serve him, the true and only God, or

they should be swept off when the fulness of his wrath should come upon them. . . . And the fulness of his wrath cometh upon them when they are ripened in iniquity. . . . And it is not until the fulness of iniquity among the children of the land, that they are swept off (Ether 2:8-10; emphasis added).

It is evident that the Lord intended that the covenant apply to the land and all nations he would bring to it. The obligation of any nation possessing it was that its people must “serve the God of the land, who is Jesus Christ” (Ether 2:12). Failure of any nation to serve God would result in its being swept off through the wrath of God when its people had “ripened in iniquity” (v. 9). In Lehi’s words the covenant was in force, “if it so be that they shall serve him according to the commandments which he hath given”; but, it would be voided “because of iniquity; for if iniquity shall abound cursed shall be the land for their sakes” (2 Nephi 1:7). “Nothing, save it shall be iniquity among them, shall harm or disturb their prosperity upon the face of this land forever” (1:31; see also Enos 1:10; Mosiah 29:27; Alma 45:16; 3 Nephi 9:12; and 20:28).

Many scriptures show the covenant extended to a mighty Gentile nation characterized by liberty in the latter days. In Nephi’s vision of the tree of life, he beheld the Spirit of the Lord fall upon the Gentiles and lead them to the promised land where they received all the covenant blessings (1 Nephi 13:12-15).

In clarifying Isaiah’s teachings of our latter-day Gentiles, Nephi taught his family that after the house of Israel was scattered and confounded, the Lord would raise up a mighty nation of Gentiles on the face of this land (1 Nephi 22:7; see also 2 Nephi 10:9-10, 18).

When Jesus ministered among the Nephites, he prophesied that in the latter days, the gospel in its fulness would go to the Gentiles. He described their role in preparing the house of Israel and assured them that this blessing would remain as long as they were faithful. He even stated that “the Father commanded me—that I should give unto this people this land for their inheritance” (3 Nephi 16:16; see also 21:4).

The great Book of Mormon societies experienced high levels of civilization and prospered abundantly. Few believers would argue that any other nation received greater privileges and blessings. They had many prophets, great revelations, experienced many years of a near-perfect society, and received a lengthy personal visit from the resurrected Lord. But in time they allowed man's wisdom to replace God's revelations and greed to replace love. Their fall provides vivid examples of the kinds of spiritual decline that lead to the loss of the covenant blessings. Their experience stands as a significant warning of future woes to the nations of the Americas, for the covenant is as much to all of us today as it was to them.

In the tree of life vision Nephi saw his seed overpowered by the seed of his brethren "because of the *pride* of my seed, and the *temptations* of the devil" (1 Nephi 12:19; emphasis added). The prophet Samuel described the decline among the people in his own day, which Nephi had foreseen. Their hearts were so set upon their riches that they became a curse to them, and they remembered God no more. Their hearts swelled with pride, boasting, envy, strife, malice and much iniquity (Hel. 13:21-23). When Samuel warned them of their evil, they sought to destroy him. Mormon recorded that *only* a minority of the people walked "circumspectly" before God, the majority having become increasingly hardened in iniquity (Hel. 16:10, 12).

The fullest description of the iniquities that caused the downfall of the Nephites was given by Mormon at the point of their destruction. He observed that because of their iniquities the Spirit of the Lord had ceased to be with them. Being without Christ or God, they were led by Satan. While they had once been a delightful people, they were now aimless, being driven as chaff in the wind. As a result, the Lord told Mormon that he "reserved their blessings, which they might have received in the land, for the Gentiles who shall possess the land" (Mormon 5:19).

In an epistle to Moroni, Mormon described their increased hardening of their hearts in defiance of God. They had no fear of death and had ceased to love one another; they sought revenge and thirsted for blood. They raped their female Lamanite prisoners and then tortured them to death. Then like wild beasts the Nephite guards devoured their flesh as a token of bravery. Mormon lamented the depravity of his people (Moroni 9:3-18) by describing them as “strong in their perversion,” “brutal,” without principle, past feeling, and taking “delight in everything save that which is good,” lamenting “I cannot recommend them unto God lest He should smite me” (vv. 9-21).

The record of rebellion and spiritual decline among the Jaredites shows a similar scenario of creeping corruption, the driving away of the Lord’s spirit, and the ultimate destruction of a great people. With each new upsurge of iniquity came many prophets trying to lead the people back to righteousness. They warned the people of imminent destruction if they refused to repent, but each time they rejected the prophets and hardened their hearts toward God. Secret societies worked for greater power and riches and led to greater and greater wickedness. The people became devoid of faith, believing only what they could see (Ether 11:12-13; 12:1-5; 13:13-14).

In the end, the prophet Ether was directed to prophesy to Coriantumr that unless the people repented all but he would be destroyed. He alone would be spared so he could see the fulfillment of God’s word that another people would receive the land for their inheritance after the destruction of his nation. Moroni concluded: “And thus we see that the Lord did visit them in the fulness of his wrath, and their wickedness and abominations had prepared a way for their everlasting destruction” (Ether 14:25).

How closely do these descriptions approximate modern conditions in the United States? Is the direction we are headed irreversible? With this background of our covenant land of promise and its blessings, and the terms on which our continued possession is determined, we are ready to make a studied

assessment of our performance under the duties imposed by the covenant. An evaluation of our compliance with the terms centers upon these simple questions:

- (1) Does this nation serve the God of this land?
- (2) Does iniquity abound? and
- (3) Is this nation “ripened in iniquity”?

### The Gallup Studies of Religion in America

Since the 1950s the Gallup survey organization has shown an increasing interest in the religious life of the American people. Conducting regular studies on religion in America and drawing upon many other studies available to them, the Gallup reports have provided a great deal of interesting data for our examination. In a 1977 report they observed,

While an increasing number of surveys have probed the religious scene in America in recent years, *the field of religion remains under-researched*. In fact, religious leaders today appear to have only a vague idea of where the nation is headed religiously and spiritually (*Religion in America 1977* 8; emphasis added; hereafter *RA*).

The Princeton Religion Research Center (PRRC) was also founded in 1977 to do research in the religious life of the American society. Its stated purpose is “to gain a better understanding of the nature and depth of religious commitment in the U.S. and abroad and to explore ways this information can promote spiritual growth” (*RA 1977-78*, inside back cover).

The object of this chapter is to use the reported findings of the PRRC and the Gallup organization and to present them as a measure of how well this great Gentile nation (the United States) is living up to the responsibilities of the covenant given to the prophet Lehi.

The general assessment of the PRRC and Gallup studies is that American religious participation and belief were strong

through the 1950s but suffered sharp declines in the 1960s. Many thought this decline was irreparable, and would lead, perhaps, to the demise of religion—at least institutionalized religion. Since the dark days of the 60s, however, there has been an increased return to religious normalcy or perhaps even to a startling, unprecedented period of “spiritual renewal” (*RA 1976 5*).

The data presented here are drawn from eight issues of the *Religion in America* reports dating from 1975 to 1985. Each report monitors data on basic and continuous measures of religious life in America, including church attendance, the importance of religious beliefs, the influence of religion on American life, and public confidence in church or organized religion. In addition, each report focuses on one or more specific measures related to American religious life.

### The 1975 Report

The 1975 report begins with the following statement:

As the nation enters the final quarter of the twentieth century, recent survey findings offer clear signs that the long slide in religious interest and participation—beginning in the early 1960’s and accelerating in the late 60’s—is coming to a halt. Church attendance, Bible-reading, and the observations of persons of each major faith all appear to point to this conclusion (*RA 1975 i*).

Following this statement are some cynical views which doubt a lasting return to institutional health. One particularly pessimistic view is of particular interest to LDS people: “ ‘The fervor of the sects, of the Jesus freaks, of the Mormons, and other groups is, in my opinion, simply the last throes of a mortally wounded Christian church’ ” (i).

This report notes that church attendance during the average week declined by 9% (Catholic 16%) between 1958 and 1971 (the 1960s). However, a leveling off was noted between 1971 and the data year of the report, 1974. The percentage of



Americans attending church during the average week in 1974 was 40% (3). Of those who described themselves as “very religious,” only 9% reported that they seldom or never attended church while 79% reported that they attended regularly (6).

Sixty-three percent of those surveyed responded positively to the question, “Have you, yourself, read any part of the Bible at home within the past year?” The percentage so responding increased steadily with age, but decreased somewhat with educational attainment (7).

When asked, “At the present time, do you think religion as a whole is increasing its influence on American life or losing its influence?” only 31% of the respondents thought that it was increasing. While 31% might seem to be a disappointing figure, it is more than twice the number so responding in 1970 (14%). In fact, one would have to go back a whole decade to get to a comparably high figure, though it should be noted that the figure declined sharply from 69% in 1957 to 14% in 1970 (11).

In answer to the question, “Do you believe that religion can answer all or most of today’s problems, or is it largely old fashioned and out-of-date?” 62% indicated that it “can answer” (compared to 81% in 1957). Only 20% indicated they felt it was old fashioned and out of date (14).

In a measure of the confidence of the general public in the church or organized religion, 44% indicated a “great deal” of confidence. Only 29% expressed great confidence in public schools, 20% in the Supreme Court, 16% in television, 15% in Congress, and 10% in big business (19-20).

### The 1976 Report

The most important contribution of the 1976 study is its international reflection—it claims to be “the first global study of lifestyles and religious beliefs” (1).

The introduction to this report implies that the results would surprise many social commentators who typically see the United States “ ‘as a secularized and largely agnostic nation.’ . . . This study shows Americans to be the most religious people in the world among the industrial nations in terms of the importance placed on religion and in terms of the levels of belief in God and an afterlife” (1). While the United States is tops in religious makeup, Japan, a nation nearly comparable in industrialization and education, is “at the opposite extreme” (2).

In America, 56% said that their religious beliefs were “very important” to them. This compares well to the same response in other countries: 36% in Italy and Canada, 26% in the Benelux countries (a coalition of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg), 25% in Australia, 23% in the United Kingdom, 22% in France, 17% in West Germany and Scandinavia, and only 12% in Japan (8).

To the question, “Do you believe in God or a universal spirit?” the response in the United States has remained very constant over several decades, with 94% answering affirmatively. From 1948 to 1975, belief in God in Scandinavian countries declined from 81 to 65 percent, in West Germany from 81 (in 1968) to 72 percent, and in Australia from 95 to 80 percent (13). When asked, “Do you believe in life after death?” 69% of Americans answered “yes,” compared with 54% in Canada, 48% in Australia and Benelux, 43% in the United Kingdom, 40% in Italy, 39% in France, 35% in Scandinavia, 33% in West Germany, and 18% in Japan (17).

In a special section on the “Views of College Students” it was revealed that they lag behind national figures both in weekly church attendance (34%) and belief in God or a universal spirit (89%). Their views of abortion, pre-marital sex, legalizing marijuana, and general happiness were also measured (64-68).

## The 1977-78 Report

The 1977-78 report addresses the rising spiritual expectations of our society. The “key question” raised here is, “Can the churches and synagogues of America satisfy the higher spiritual hunger of the public?” (1). The findings of increases in the religious life of our society turned the focus of the report to the status of the churches of the nation. The report noted that “the religious scene is in a state of some turmoil, with dissension within the ranks of certain denominations and sharp debate over such issues as the ordination of women and homosexuals” (1).

In assessing the state of religion in America, certain trends appear clear: (1) levels of belief and religious practice remain high; (2) interest in religion is growing sharply; (3) considerable involvement in experiential religion is found; (4) the evangelical movement is having an increasing[ly] powerful impact on religious life; and (5) religion is continuing to play a vital role in volunteerism and community service (pg. 1).

Evidence of “an upsurge in religious interest” coupled with a “shocking lack of knowledge” about religious doctrine and church history led to conclusions of “spiritual illiteracy,” “spiritual immaturity,” and “spiritual adolescence.”

There are, to be sure, encouraging trends in the religious scene in America today, but the next few years will tell us whether America is simply on a religious “kick” or whether there is something of real substance to our new interest in religious and spiritual matters (3).

The election of Jimmy Carter prompted a look into evangelical religious life in America. The most dominant characteristic in evangelical disciples is a “born again” experience. Hard-core evangelicals also “believe in the literal interpretation of the Bible, and have witnessed to their faith [have tried to encourage others to accept Christ and be born again]” (42).

To the question, “Would you say that you have been ‘born again’ or have had a ‘born again’ experience—that is, a turning point in your life when you committed yourself to Christ?” 34%

answered affirmatively. The figure increased steadily with age but diminished as income increased. The experience was substantially more common among women than men and among non-white races (43). It was also found that a substantial number of Americans were involved with non-traditional religions including yoga, transcendental meditation, eastern religions, the charismatic movement, faith healing, and mysticism (52).

### The 1979-80 Report

This report for 1979-80 focused on some of the major problems facing American religion in the decade of the 1980s. "Survey evidence, in fact, indicates that the 1980s may be a decade of discontent—a period of serious dislocations in society. Signs also point to the fact that the U. S. is suffering a moral crisis of the first dimension" (1). Violence, crime, lawlessness, alcohol and drug abuse, school discipline deficiencies, cheating, and diminished honesty and ethical standards are identified as root issues in this moral crisis, which problems seem to stem from the dissolution of the family unit (1-2).

Amid this gloom was a ray of optimism that was very significant. The teenage population appeared "highly religious." "Young people appear to be spiritually restless; they want a religious faith, but at the same time find organized religion to be spiritually lifeless" (3-4). An important difference between younger and older Americans was the younger generation's increased "acceptance of both marijuana usage and sexual freedom" (2).

Two significant trends were noted in the report:

Too many Americans belong to a category of "not-quite-Christians" who believe, but without strong convictions; who want the rewards of faith without the obligations; who say they are Christians or Jews but tend to keep the news to themselves.

Survey evidence indicates that a complete re-evaluation of the status of religious education is needed. Our youth are growing up with little familiarity with the Bible, little conviction about sin and

the need for repentance—and, in the case of Christians—without sensing the joy of a close personal relationship with Christ (5, 7-8).

This spiritual illiteracy stems from poor training in the family. Gallup calls for increased religious education through a team effort of parents and clergy and gives seven suggestions to bring it about (8-11).

A major contribution of the 1979-80 report is the consideration given to the “unchurched” in our society. Gallup studies hold that 61 million fit in this classification and appear to be “remarkably religious,” with very high percentages stating a belief in the resurrection and claiming to have had a “born again” experience.

Among the key criticisms of churches given by the unchurched are that they have lost “the real spiritual part of religion,” and are “too concerned with organizational as opposed to the theological or spiritual issues.” Other objections cited frequently deal with the “narrowness of teachings about belief and moral conduct,” and “excessive concern for money” (13).

While critical of the loss of spiritual character in the churches, 52% would welcome an invitation to become actively involved in a church (13). Gallup concluded this assessment by quoting Lloyd John Ogilvie in “The Need of Vision for a Revitalized Church in the Eighties”:

The primary goal is a new, authentic spirituality which is Biblical, reformed, and consistent with how people can change, grow, and become responsible change agents. To be on fire for Christ, filled with His Spirit, and involved in dynamic ministry, must become the modeled, articulated, expected norm for every church member. The image of the new breed must be made clear and the call to a national movement with world implications must be impelling and adventuresome (16).

### The 1981 Report

This report examines the need for renewal of the religious life of our society. The critical dilemma is pointed out by the “*remarkable stability*” (3) of religion in America indicated by

high scores in belief and participation contrasted with the low scores in comprehension and application.

The more one probes into the religious and spiritual lives of Americans, through surveys, the more concerned one becomes about what may lie beneath the often impressive outward signs of religion in America today (4).

While almost “every home has at least one Bible,” only 12% read it daily. “One fourth of teenagers have *never* read the Bible . . . [and] most of us would flunk any test on the Bible,” even simply naming half of the Ten Commandments. While belief in God is high, no substantial basis is indicated for it.

Christians claim “a belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ,” but appear shallow in “their *understanding*, . . . relationship, and *commitment* to Him.” Prayer for Americans appears “unstructured and superficial,” consisting of “petition[s] rather than . . . thanksgiving, intercession, or seeking forgiveness.” Many view God “as a ‘divine Santa Claus.’” The frequency of prayer has also declined (4).

Gallup concluded the 1981 review with this assessment:

Secular forces today threaten the churches and synagogues of America, perhaps as never before. But the decline of religion in America, many feel, will not come through overpowering societal forces outside ourselves—religiously committed persons have stood many more severe tests than we face today—but from indifference, religious ignorance, and spiritual immaturity (6).

## The 1982 Report

In 1982 the report was subtitled “Who are Truly Devout Among Us?” It looks to see what fundamental shifts have occurred in our basic attitudes and values, and what impact those shifts have had on religious life in America. While 81% of the respondents claim to be religious, in the section dealing with the Ten Commandments “higher proportions believe in the social commandments than the first three commandments—the theological commandments” (2). They found the following:

- Only about one person in four says religion is the most important influence in his or her life;
- Most want religious education of some sort for their children, but religious faith ranks far below many other traits that parents would like see developed in their children.
- Only about one person in eight says he or she would consider sacrificing everything for their religious beliefs, or God.
- One fourth of U.S. adults who state their religious preference as Christian claim to lead a “very Christian life”—a finding which may surprise and concern religious leaders and educators (3).

Recognizing that the ultimate goal of all denominations is to move people to “deeper levels of ‘spiritual commitment,’ ” the study focused on the need for new measures

to probe beneath the external religiosity to the bedrock of spiritual commitment. The specific objectives are to determine the proportion of persons in the various levels or stages of spiritual commitment, to find out about their background, and to discover what their deep faith has meant both in their *own* lives and for society as a whole (3).

PRRC and Gallup desired to know whether there was a difference in the lives of people with a high level of spiritual commitment. From the methodology they developed it was determined that the 160 million adults in our society would be divided as follows:

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| • Very high level of spiritual commitment   | 12% |
| • Fairly high level of spiritual commitment | 37% |
| • Fairly low level of spiritual commitment  | 36% |
| • Very low level of spiritual commitment    | 15% |

The following are seven questions or statements (pg. 53) people were asked to respond to, ordered by the highest percentage of respondents answering it “completely true”:

- |   |       |
|---|-------|
| • I believe that God loves me even though I may not always please him | (61%) |
| • I believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ                           | (60%) |
| • I wish my religious faith were stronger                             | (46%) |

- I receive a great deal of comfort and support from my religious beliefs (38%)
  - I try hard to put my religious beliefs into practice in my relations with all people including people of different races, religions, nationalities and backgrounds (37%)
  - I constantly seek God's will through prayer (26%)
  - My religious faith is the most important influence in my life (26%)
- Net of those saying completely true to all 7 statements (12%)

Considering these differences in spiritual commitment in the measurements they made, they found

the "highly spiritually committed" to differ markedly from the rest of the population in attitude, belief and behavior in many key respects. In fact, the differences on the basis of levels of spiritual commitment are far more dramatic than the differences on the basis of age, sex, level of formal education and other key background characteristics (53, 112-124).

### The 1984 Report

In this report, Gallup addressed the issue that previous reports had increasingly pointed out: the inconsistency between measures that indicated a strong religious society and indications that our religious stock was not bearing fruit. Though religious participation and beliefs were high among Americans, our society was being less kind and loving, less ethical and moral, and less like a society that is committed to and built upon religious principles.

In his lengthy introductory essay, Mr. Gallup emphasized his concern with the findings, as follows:

America in 1984 appears to be confronted with a giant paradox: Religion is growing in importance among Americans but morality is losing ground.



On the one hand, levels of religious involvement remain high: Nine in 10 state a religious preference, seven in 10 are church members and six in 10 attend religious services in a given month. A majority, furthermore, say they are more interested in religious and spiritual matters today than they were five years ago.

On the other hand, widespread cheating is found in all levels of society and two-thirds of Americans hold the view that the level of ethics in the U.S. has declined during the last decade. . . .

The findings, which show little difference in the ethical behavior and views of the churched and unchurched, underscore the need for religious leaders to channel this new religious interest in America not simply into to [*sic.*] religious involvement but into deep spiritual commitment, for Gallup surveys show dramatic differences in attitudes and behavior between the “highly spiritually committed” and those with less spiritual commitment (although the ethical dimension was not tested) (1).

Many trends give evidence of this “giant paradox.” Some major ones drawn from the survey results follow:

- Crime is endemic. The U.S. is one of the most crime-ridden nations in the world today. One out of every five of its citizens has been mugged, robbed, assaulted, or had his or her house burglarized at least once during the past year. Our system of justice seems hardly able to cope: For every 500 serious crimes, only about 20 adults and five juveniles are sent to jail.
- Drug and alcohol abuse is common. One person in three reports that drinking is a problem in his home. Alcohol abuse leads to thousands of domestic disputes, homicides, suicides, and traffic fatalities. The death toll is estimated to run between 50,000 and 200,000 a year. The dollar cost—in medical bills, property damage, lost wages, and productivity—reaches \$100 billion annually.
- One person in five says he knows of at least one case of child abuse in his neighborhood; and a like number know of at least one case of spouse abuse. Nearly half of America’s marriages end in divorce, and one in every six births is illegitimate. The cost to the taxpayer is put at around \$6 billion a year. . . .
- Some 32 million Americans are defined as “poor,” earning less than \$9,287 for a family of four. Among young people joblessness is above 20%; among minority youth, close to 50%. . . .
- Cheating is “epidemic and big business” across the U.S., Hattye Liston of North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University recently told the annual convention of the American Psychological Association. “Cheating,” he said, “has become an American pastime.”
- Cheating among high school and college students is commonplace. Supreme Court Justice Warren Burger has said, “We have virtually

eliminated from the public schools any effort to teach values of integrity, truth, personal accountability and respect for others' rights" (2-3).

These factors are alarming and one must ask about the obvious discrepancies. Why is interest and participation in religion so high while its practice is so low? The "most shocking" point addressed in the study is that "little difference is found in the ethical views and behavior of the unchurched and the churched" (19). Mere church involvement has little effect upon ethical behavior.

A study of the religious attitudes of America's teenage population shows Jesus Christ placed only fifth on their list of the "Greatest Persons in History" (61). Only 25% "express a high degree of confidence in organized religion" and feel that "one can be a good Christian (or Jew)" without attending church (64). Yet, findings lead to a conclusion that this part of our society is remarkably religious. The proportion stating a belief in God was 95%, a slight increase over the national adult figure. A higher proportion than adults expressed belief in a personal God. Eighty percent indicated that religion played a "very important" or "fairly important" role in their lives. Only 6% indicate "no religious preference or affiliation" while 70% claim church membership. Church attendance is as high as among adults, and attending religious "retreats" appealed to 46% of the males and 57% of females. Also, 87% pray and 39% of them pray frequently (65). Bible reading occurs daily among 12%, at least weekly among another 24% and at least monthly among another 13%. Those who responded "never/not sure" were 30%. Further, results indicated that teens were more likely than adults to turn to churches for answers to moral issues, problems of family life, and spiritual needs (74).

## The 1985 Report

This report reviews research data on Religion in America since 1935, the beginning of scientific polling. Each of five decades are considered in general terms with shifts in the religious mood being noted. In each case it is recognized that more factors than religion are interwoven into most changes noted. Considering the project over fifty years' time drew this comment from Mr. Gallup:

Yet probably no more difficult task faces the research practitioner than attempting to measure the religious mood of the public. There is much about religion that defies statistical description; questions are blunt instruments while religious beliefs are varied and subtle and do not yield easily to categorization (4).

While some measures had significant changes over time, the most appropriate term for the religious character of the nation as a whole over the last half century was "stability."

Following a decade-by-decade review is this brief summation of the religious character of America (12).

Certain basic themes emerge from the mass of survey data collected over the period of five decades—themes that probably apply not only to the 50-year history of scientific polling, but to the history of the nation:

- The widespread appeal or popularity of religion
- The gap between belief and commitment; between high religiosity and low ethics
- The glaring lack of knowledge
- What would appear to be a failure, in part of organized religion to make a difference in society in terms of morality and ethics
- The superficiality of faith (12).

That four of these five themes are significantly negative is alarming and form a rather bad report card for our religious life.

## Conclusion

In the United States (most especially among the LDS), there is a strong pride in the American character. This land of liberty is a sacred trust, a bastion of freedom. Religious freedom was the first freedom sought by Americans; that orientation to faith formed the bedrock of our society and has been cherished in all of its diversity over the years. It is a great part of the national will and character.

The implications of this review of so many measures of religiosity in America is somewhat troublesome. One cannot help but be impressed at the high levels of participation, belief, confidence, and importance American citizens manifest in religion. The figures are especially impressive when considered against those of other nations. But in the end, don't they really underscore the most basic religious crisis? While the reports commend the expression of faith in our society, there is increasing evidence of serious inconsistencies in its moral life.

The 1977-78 report noted a "shocking level of knowledge" of religious doctrine and history, and asserted that religion in America suffers from "spiritual illiteracy," "spiritual immaturity," and "spiritual adolescence."

The 1979-80 report warned of a "moral crisis of the first dimension," characterized by crime, substance abuse, diminished integrity, and broken homes. Our people indicate little conviction about sin and repentance and a real relationship with God.

The 1981 report noted that beliefs were shallow and prayer was superficial and self-serving. Indifference, ignorance, and immaturity were threatening continued religious strength.

By 1982 it was clear to PRRC and the Gallup organization that their measures were insufficient and an accurate study of our religious nature would require analysis by degree of commitment. Important differences in attitude and behavior were noted in the 12% classified, "highly spiritually committed."

The 1984 report addresses the paradox directly, reporting impressive increases in religious participation, but noting corresponding decreases in morality, and little difference in ethical views and behavior between the churching and the unchurching.

While Americans appear highly religious when compared with other nations, the key question remains: are Americans fulfilling their obligations to the covenant that Lehi and others described? At what level of iniquity will God withdraw the blessings and exercise his wrath? Who are the ones really less religious? Europeans, who in great numbers neither believe nor participate in religious life? Or Americans, who claim belief and do participate, but give little indication that its teachings influence their behavior?

Does this nation serve the God of this land, even Jesus Christ? Surely we can find fault with the quality of serving by our society, but at the same time there is abundant evidence that devotion and faith are far from dead.

Does iniquity abound? Abound means, "to exist in great quantity," or, "to be filled." All would agree that iniquity does exist in great quantity; indeed, America seems filled with it, yet these studies indicate that things could be much worse.

Is this nation ripened in iniquity? While wickedness is increasing and we may say that we are ripening in it, the records of the Nephites and Jaredites assure us that as a whole nation we have far to go to reach their levels.

President Ezra Taft Benson spoke persuasively of these issues in his remarkable treatise, *The Constitution: A Heavenly Banner*. He quoted the prophecy of Joseph Smith about the prospects of our fate being like that of the Nephite and Jaredite nations.

We are fast approaching that moment prophesied by Joseph Smith when he said: "Even this nation will be on the very verge of crumbling to pieces and tumbling to the ground, and when the Constitution is upon the brink of ruin, this people will be the staff

upon which the nation shall lean, and they shall bear the Constitution away from the very verge of destruction" (28).

Two additional remarks by President Benson add needed assurance to our search.

I have faith that the Constitution will be saved as prophesied by Joseph Smith. But it will not be saved in Washington. It will be saved by the citizens of this nation who love and cherish freedom. It will be saved by enlightened members of this Church—men and women who will subscribe to and abide the principles of the Constitution (30-31).

It is my conviction, however, that when the Lord comes, the Stars and Stripes will be floating on the breeze over this people (33).

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