



BECOMING THE BELOVED OF THE LORD

MATURING THROUGH THE STAGES OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

By *Philip G. McLemore*

SEVERAL YEARS AGO I developed a model of five stages of spiritual growth and maturation based on personal experiences that had unfolded during my meditation practice, and which I believe are consistent with images of the soul's relationship with God presented in both the Bible and Mormon scripture. For the purpose of this article, I'll discuss this model in a Mormon context. In developmental order, these stages are: Parent/Child, Steward, Disciple, Friend, and Beloved.

This model is based on the assumption that the spiritual maturation process is like the physical maturation process, in that there is an interweaving combination of things we *can* control and things we *can't* control. Physically, I have a DNA blueprint and genetic tendencies. Many of these are going to express

themselves regardless of what I do; others will be influenced by how I eat, exercise, and manage stress and the toxic load of my environment. Spiritually, I have a divine nature and potential that might or might not express itself based on things I can do, such as a cultivating a mature, responsible, moral lifestyle, and things I can't control, such as the flow of sanctifying grace. These two poles are represented in both exoteric and esoteric (or external and internal) spiritual practices—and both are necessary.¹ Unlike the physical maturation process, which often malfunctions and ultimately leads to dissolution, the spiritual maturation process leads to spiritual rebirth, a Christ-like nature, and oneness with and in God—as long as we let it flow and don't try to get control of it. Jesus' statement that we must “be born again” (or the

alternate translation of “be born from above”) implies the mysterious union of choice and no choice, especially when he uses the image of the “wind” for being “born of the Spirit” in John 3:8. We can't control the wind but we can be available to receive it as Jesus himself received “grace for grace” and continued “from grace to grace” (D&C 93:12, 13). The ability to “receive” is the main characteristic of upper Disciple to Beloved stages and the “inner” path and practices.

The first two stages, Parent/Child and Steward, relate not only to our personal relationship with God but also to our relationship with the Church and its leadership. The third stage, Disciple, is a transitional stage in which people tend to either cycle back into the first two stages in church leadership roles or move on to the Friend and Beloved stages.

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These latter two stages are strictly personal in nature and emerge as one spends more and more time in communion with God. None of these stages are static or mutually exclusive, and since most of us do not develop through an even and balanced process, it is to be expected that we would be moving back and forth among two or three of these stages at any point in our maturation process. However, one of these stages will generally characterize our current inner development, spiritual perspective, and relationship with God.

Each stage represents a move in the direction of increased personal responsibility, flexibility, freedom, wisdom, and—ultimately—oneness with God. At each stage, we may receive insights and inspiration, but these will be perceived and interpreted according to the maturity level of that developmental stage and will therefore be limited by that level of understanding. We typically have spiritual experiences that punctuate our lives in the first two stages, while in the final two stages life itself is experienced as spiritual.

The system of spiritual practice that flows out of my model would begin with the external practices of learning and obedience, progressive self-discipline, service, and outward prayer and ritual.² This should evolve into a greater desire to become Christ-like, a cultivation of Christian virtues, mental calmness, and emotional maturity; and finally a shift to inner work characterized by an increasingly deeper prayer experience. Prayer should shift from talking to God to being receptive to spiritual perception and higher states of consciousness. Then inner transformation symbolized by the rituals begins

to unfold. In my experience, without some form of contemplative prayer or spiritual meditation practice, we are not able to access the inner purification and awakening that results from conscious communion in the presence of God and from receiving the flow of grace that unveils the Friend and Beloved stages.³ The “natural man” identity and orientation—no matter how righteous we try to make it—is literally “lost” and “fallen” and incapable of redeeming itself. This is why the Apostle Paul calls for its crucifixion and death (Galatians 5:24) and for us to become a “new creature (or creation)” (2 Corinthians 5:17) and to walk in a “newness of life” (Romans 6:4). My biggest problem with LDS gospel teaching is its emphasis on trying to make the “natural man” good enough to qualify for the Celestial Kingdom rather than crucifying it or “putting it off” (Mosiah 3:19) and becoming a new creature through spiritual rebirth.

PARENT/CHILD

THE CHIEF CHARACTERISTICS of the Parent/Child stage are deference to authority, learning, and obedience. While in this stage of spiritual development, we feel dependent upon the protection, nurture, instruction, and guidance of parents, mentors, church leaders, or even the Church itself. At best, these people and institutions are motivated by love as they try to protect us from unhealthy and unholy influences, providing what we need to mature into the next stage of development. This parental leadership usually consists of teaching and modeling the basic tenets of the faith. Even though I was baptized at age 19, I began at

this stage—and really needed it.

Our time in this stage can become unhealthy, however, if we get stuck in a dependent relationship with these “parents,” whether biological, associative, ecclesiastical, or even divine, especially if our spiritual practices reflect thoughtless obedience, immaturity, and superstition—believing our “good” actions control God’s behavior. In Mormonism, we seem sentimentally attached to the Parent/Child image of our relationship with God as evidenced by the regular singing of the children’s hymn “I Am A Child of God” in adult classes and meetings. Some adult members, capable of so much more, seem to have carried the mentality and identity of the Parent/Child image to a point of spiritual stagnation.⁴ To a group of church members who were using the practice of speaking in tongues in a childish and immature way, the Apostle Paul said, “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things . . . do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature” (1 Corinthians 13:11 and 14:20 NKJV).

STEWARD

THE STEWARD STAGE develops as we master the inspired guidelines and carnal commandments: when we can live according to their dictates and wisdom without constantly being reminded. I use the term “carnal commandments” to refer to directives that teach us to master the needs, drives, and desires of our bodies. Once these commandments are mastered to a reasonable degree, we can be trusted to live

and act in a responsible, mature, wholesome manner without direct oversight, and we can even be expected to contribute independently to the well-being of the family, church, or whatever organization we are serving. Our parents, mentors, and church authorities can give minimal direction and still expect productive results. Inspired and creative service is possible to the degree that those in the Steward stage are open to spiritual influence.

The Elder Son in the parable of the Prodigal Son was a good Steward in that he “kept all of the commandments” of the Father. However, he was insecure and restless because he did not really “know” the Father. Also, if we remain in the Steward stage too long, we can burn out and find our service boring and frustrating. Many “good” church members remain at this level for reasons discussed below. This stage can turn especially unhealthy if we become stuck in an external or legalistic perspective, where we tend to become judgmental and unforgiving.

Due to the Church’s need to assert and maintain organizational control—and also because of the inherent risks of the next stage—we find a tendency among Church leaders, consciously or subconsciously, to encourage the Parent/Child and Steward stages and allow for just one form of the Disciple stage (explained below). Those who inhabit the first two stages or the one acceptable type of Disciple stage are typically predictable and easily managed. Those in these stages assist in growing and stabilizing the organization and represent the “ideal way” to think, believe, and act in the Church. However, there comes a point when the principles

and procedures that foster organizational success come into conflict with and begin to inhibit individual spiritual growth. I believe this inherent conflict accounts for much of the high levels of inactivity, general boredom, and restlessness of many LDS Church members.

DISCIPLE

THE DISCIPLE STAGE unfolds in us as we begin to understand the principles that underlie the rules and commandments we follow. Soon we can use these underlying principles to respond to situations that rules and commandments don’t directly address. Disciples can face the “gray” areas of life with increasing wisdom. As our confidence grows, we gain a desire to not only serve the Master but to become like him. As our Disciple inspiration deepens, our love for the Master increases, as does our desire to more substantially serve others. Those in the Disciple stage are typically joyful, enthusiastic, creative, and insightful.

At this point, however, the relative safety and predictability of the first two stages end and several possible paths open. I’ll address four of them:

1. If the Disciple discovers the inner path and begins to practice contemplative disciplines, he or she will quickly open to a spiritually transformative flow of divine grace. This Disciple notices that his or her efforts to cultivate Christ-like virtues and to be mentally stable and emotionally mature—being able to “act and not to be acted upon” (2 Nephi 2:26)—are empowered. Bad habits and unhealthy thought and behavior patterns that seemed resistant to change for

decades are now easily dissolving; in fact, the Christ-like qualities he or she has long sought after are spontaneously unfolding. This Disciple will move beyond a common understanding of Jesus to a discernment of his actual nature. Soon he or she will begin to directly experience the presence and nature of God as well as the divine nature of his or her own soul. “Knowing for themselves,” these Disciples develop spiritual confidence and independence and now teach as those “having authority and not as the scribes,” which means they are not dependent on outside sources, books, teachers, and leaders. At some point during this process, the Disciple’s primary loyalty naturally shifts from the Church to the Master himself, and he or she will mature into the Friend stage.

This shift occurs when the Disciple realizes that although church participation might be helpful or desirable, it is no longer necessary. This Disciple is not disloyal to the Church and will remain humble when faced with differences and difficulties in Church teaching or practice, however, he or she will appropriately confront spiritual nonsense and abuse and always choose the insight gained from direct experience with God over contrary opinions, teachings, or consequential requests from church leaders. If it becomes obvious to leaders and fellow ward members that this Disciple’s loyalty has shifted, they will look at the Disciple differently—often with perplexity or even suspicion. Now seen as unsafe and unpredictable, this type of disciple (in all major religious traditions) tends to be marginalized and excluded from leadership roles.

2. There is a definite risk involved in the Discipleship stage: the risk of self-deception. The Church has experienced many sad episodes of self-deceived Disciples who mistook imagination for spiritual discernment. Once “off the path,” these errant Disciples can cause confusion and chaos in the lives of their families and among church members. Some of these people can have mental or emotional problems; others can be very intelligent and talented, which gives them the power to influence many others. Some, through innate ability, can “skip” into glimpses of higher spiritual realizations, but without the balance of a mature, moral, responsible lifestyle (the outer work) and an egoless exploration of the world of Spirit (the inner work), they cannot become established in it. The chief characteristic of this destructive Disciple path is self-absorption, where one’s own thoughts and perceptions become master. These Disciples easily see the weaknesses and limitations of the first two stages, but instead of responding with compassion, empathy, and a mentor’s spirit, they become hostile to these “lower” expressions. All Disciples prefer the inherent superiority of principles to rules and commandments; however, self-absorbed, self-deceived Disciples can easily rationalize selfish, prideful, and even immoral behavior, using their intelligence to manipulate principles toward outcomes they desire. In many cases, their Disciple potential is lost and they begin living below the good qualities of the Parent/Child- and Steward-stages they had judged to be inferior.

3. A third type of Disciple—the kind the Church finds most acceptable—is one

who has gained a rich understanding of gospel principles, loves Jesus and Heavenly Father as he or she understands them, has unquestioned loyalty to the Church in spite of personal differences, and is devoted to serving others. This type of Disciple studies deeply and broadly, has a rich prayer life, “magnifies” his or her callings and responsibilities, and is often a gifted teacher or leader. These are responsible, mature, thoughtful people. These Disciples typically avoid inner or deeply contemplative spiritual practices since such are outside of usual Church practice, so their energy, insight, and gifts are poured back into the Church. They tend to not become frustrated with the Church’s persistent “back to the basics” approach, especially since they are admired and sought after for their inspiring teachings and/or writings that go beyond “the basics.” In moments of honest self-reflection, these Disciples are disappointed with certain character flaws they have not been able to shake and are perplexed that certain spiritual qualities have eluded them even after decades of church service and devoted efforts toward spiritual growth. They do not dwell in despair, however, but look instead to the future when they expect their spiritual desires will finally be fulfilled.

4. The fourth type of Disciple has most of the characteristics of group three but is unwilling to leave the fulfillment of his or her spiritual aspirations to the future. As a result, this Disciple expands his or her studies beyond prescribed LDS readings and begins exploring a variety of spiritual philosophies and practices in both ancient and

modern expressions. These Disciples seek out like-minded individuals—often discreetly—as they try to balance their Church loyalty with a new and exciting phase of inner growth. Almost every month, I become aware of a new LDS “study group”—and their areas of inquiry are virtually unlimited. I know many LDS women who are experimenting with alternative health and therapeutic practices rooted in non-LDS spiritual philosophies. Some of these sisters are clearly developing and expressing spiritual gifts that would not be welcome in LDS meetings and activities. Some have been called in by their bishops and admonished for pretending to use the priesthood. The other difference between this Disciple group and group three is that some of these are beginning to question their loyalty to the Church. This group is much larger than Church leaders realize.

FRIEND

FRIENDSHIP IMPLIES MUTUAL interests, perspectives, sharing, and appreciation. Theologies that portray Jesus as God and humans as essentially flawed beings consider this level to be impossible or blasphemous to even consider. However, this stage should be easy for Mormons to envision. With the exception of those who teach a form of predestination that claims individuals are limited by the nature of their core intelligence, most Mormons believe that each person possesses a “divine nature” and can progress to become like God. Yet, in spite of that belief, I have found that few Mormons experience themselves as divine within. Most of them are too busy struggling with sins

of commission and omission, trying to prove themselves worthy of the Celestial Kingdom, and trying to become like Jesus through external effort. But external performances do not sanctify, lead to spiritual awakening, or foster the direct experience of our inner, divine nature.

Immature Saints practice their religion superstitiously in hopes that something good will happen—a sign that they will make it into the kingdom “out there.” More mature Latter-day Saints, devoted

to the development of Christ-like virtues, place their faith in the mercy, love, and grace of God for their ultimate redemption into the kingdom “out there.” But in both cases, these Saints usually maintain an internal sense of deficiency that makes friendship with Christ impossible, and the “out there” orientation takes them out of the present moment (or spiritual) awareness in which the friendship is experienced. Mormons comfortable in the Parent/Child or Steward relationship with

God—images that are reinforced every week in church meetings—can’t image a genuine, mutual friendship with Christ. They might imagine becoming like him in the context of morality and character, but they usually can’t imagine the full acceptance of his divine friendship. They wonder what they could possibly have to share with he who knows all, sees all, and is intimately one with the Father.

However, through meditative and contemplative practices, Disciples can begin to regularly experience the nature and presence of God, the divine nature of their own being, and the purifying influence of “grace for grace” as they naturally awaken into a friendship with Christ.⁵ What could I possibly have to bring into a relationship of equality with the Christ? An awakened divine nature! Is not divine nature, divine nature? As our own awakened soul nature is brought into Christ’s presence, we realize that it is just like his, except that it has come from our own unique life perspective and experience. Christ is deeply interested in what his Friends have to share, and his sharing in return deepens the friendship. At this stage, the mysteries of Godliness are clearly perceived and regularly unveiled. This enlivening and enlightening friendship prepares one for the next stage.

BELOVED

THE EXPERIENCE OF the Beloved stage is far beyond the expression of words. In spite of the profound experience of unity and the full acceptance of our being in friendship with Christ in the Friend stage, we still have a sense of self

PRIMARY CHARACTERISTICS OF PRAYER AT EACH STAGE

PARENT/CHILD – Asking for things you need or want from a position of dependency.

STEWARD – Asking for things you need to become a better person and to improve your capability of serving God and others.

DISCIPLE – Rejoicing in the love of God and seeking for the means of inner transformation to become like Christ. Receives guidance more than asks for help.

FRIEND – Joyful realization of one’s divine inner being and its Oneness with Christ/God.

BELOVED – Pure Communion and Oneness, Non-dual awareness. Supersedes the need for prayer since prayer’s ultimate purpose, Oneness with God, has been realized.

and other; this is dualistic and thus not an experience of pure Oneness, in which the subject-and-object (or the self-and-other) orientation dissolves. In 1 Corinthians 13:12, the Apostle Paul defines seeing God “face to face” as to “know just as I also am known.” This same expression appears in Doctrine and Covenants 76:94 in the context of one realizing the highest degree of glory and union with God, “. . . they see as they are seen, and know as they are known, having received of his fulness and of his grace.” Can you see that to “see as you are seen” (by God) and to “know as you are known” (as God knows) implies a oneness beyond our typical subject/object or self/other perception and experience?

This oneness implies the realization of the Unitive State in which we are “made perfect in one”⁶ with God—in which union there is no sense of self or other. In the teachings of most Eastern traditions this means the extinction of the individual self or personal identity. In the teachings of Jesus, I believe this refers to the mysterious and paradoxical union of the individual with God where there is pure oneness, without the loss of personal identity. My favorite Indian guru, Paramahansa Yogananda, concurs with this understanding. Using the term “yogi” to refer to one seeking union with God, he writes, “. . . the illumined yogi does not lose the individuality of his soul; instead he finds his being extended into the Being of the Spirit.”⁷

One of the most common images in spiritual literature for the deepest relationship an individual can have with God is that of a marriage or “the bridal chamber.” Consider this verse from 2 Corinthians 11:2, “. . . for I have espoused you to one

husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.”⁸ As we are purified by our inner work in the Disciple and Friend stages, our “virginity,” lost from intercourse with “the world,” is restored, meaning we have conscious experience with and knowledge of our divine nature within, which is capable of entering the bridal chamber. John Climacus, a 7th-century Christian monk, exclaimed, “Blessed is the person whose desire for God has become like the lover’s passion for the beloved.”⁹

What is the difference between a friend and a lover? Friends share but lovers unite, or become “one.” Referring to Jesus’ invitation “Come unto me” (Matthew 11:28), Neil Douglas-Klotz, in his book, *Blessings of the Cosmos*, states that the Aramaic word, *taw*—usually translated “come”—has the sense of lovers coming together for the first time. This romantic imagery might not be easy to digest in our modern culture that has lost so much innocence to carnal overexposure and overindulgence. It is also an uncomfortable image for most Mormons who are more accustomed to relating to Jesus as brother and God as father. Nevertheless, this is a wonderful image that captures the paradoxical feelings of fear and desire as new lovers begin to explore one another. Of course, in the divine romance of the unfolding of the Beloved stage, this is an exploration of one’s essence of being and the ultimate realization of its oneness with and in God.

MARTHAS AND MARYS

IT CAN BE useful to look at the Parent/Child and Steward stages as having a “male,” “doing,” “external” orientation.

This “male” path—characterized by work, goal setting, systems, power, control, and “making it happen” are vital for organization-building and maintenance. These two levels are also important steps toward spiritual rebirth since adherence to a responsible, mature, moral, productive lifestyle lays the essential foundation. However, these stages and their external, male orientation do not lead to inner purification and rebirth. Too much “maleness” in spiritual leadership and practice, characteristic of Mormonism, results in the boredom, frustration, and spiritual stagnation previously mentioned and, in my view, is the experience of most Latter-Day Saints.

On the other hand, the advanced Disciple, Friend, and Beloved stages can be seen as reflecting a “female,” “being,” “internal” orientation. The “female” path—characterized by vulnerability, surrender, reception, mercy, and grace—is that which leads us into spiritual transformation, a Christ-like nature, and Oneness with God. All of us must walk this feminine or inner path to experience intimate union with God. This is why the Bible uses the image of a bride for the church itself and for each individual in the church, both male and female. It is also the reason why Christian mystics considered each person’s soul, both male and female, to be feminine. Each one of us must enter the mystical marriage and become a bride of Christ to be fully redeemed. There is a broader dimension of subjectivity on this path, which increases the risk of self-deception, but it is a risk that must be taken if we are ever to awaken into Oneness with God. Maturation of any sort involves risk and this is absolutely true of spiritual maturity.

The distinction between these upper and lower stages or the male and female paths is nicely portrayed in the story of Martha and Mary as told in Luke 10:38–42. Jesus enters the women’s home with a group of disciples, and Martha dutifully begins the external work of serving them. Mary, on the other hand, cannot resist being in Jesus’ presence and hearing his words. Martha is disturbed at Mary’s neglect of “serving” and tattles on her to Jesus, asking for his help to get Mary working. Jesus responds, “Martha, Martha, thou art careful (or worried) and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.”

Temporal, external duties absolutely must be fulfilled responsibly, but clearly Mary was seeking “first” the kingdom of God—the “treasure in heaven.” She was doing the inner work of abiding in the presence of the Lord that leads to inner transformation and oneness with God. As with Martha’s work, many good things can be accomplished in the Parent/Child, Steward, and early Disciple stages, but our life’s purpose of becoming One with God will not be fulfilled unless we follow Mary’s path into the Friend and Beloved stages.

Sadly, those who devote themselves to the inner work of the upper stages are often pushed to the fringes, marginalized, or held in suspicion if not derision. This is true in all Christian churches and is particularly true in Mormonism. There are two reasons for this. The first is because the leadership of most churches is filled with “Marthas” who consider the spiritual, inner work of “Marys” to be selfish, unproductive, or even sinful. Second, be-

cause “Marys” will ultimately trust their inner realizations over orthodoxy, there are times when they don’t seem compliant with organizational needs and objectives. The good news is that no organizational success or acceptance can substitute for conscious union with God.

The problem with models such as mine is the tendency for people to think the objective is to get to the top as soon as possible. Maturity can be nourished but not forced. I’ve always known there was more on the spiritual path, and I’ve always had a hunger and thirst for deeper understanding and experience, but as I have reflected on my experience with each stage of this model, I’ve realized that at each step I felt joyful and satisfied. In fact, at each step I felt like I was at the peak of what I could receive and if I had died at any moment along the way it would seem like my life’s purpose had been fulfilled. I think this paradox of knowing there is more and seeking for more but at the same time feeling complete and fulfilled is a sign that your spiritual maturation is on God’s schedule.

Each of us can become the Beloved of the Lord if we will establish a responsible and moral lifestyle, mature through the stages of spiritual growth, learn the inner process of receiving the grace of God’s light and love, and continue patiently as we are transformed into the image of Christ and ultimately become One with and in God.

What is this precious love and laughter
Budding in our heart?
It is the glorious sound
Of a soul waking up!

—HAFIZ 

1. This topic is explored in my SUNSTONE article “Hindering the Saints,” 168 (September 2012), 18-26. (Also available on SUNSTONE.ORG.)

2. Most prayers that involve thoughts and words are external. Even silent, deeply personal prayers are external to our essence of being. Inner prayer, characteristic of meditation and contemplative prayer, accesses awareness and spiritual knowing beyond the dualistic cognition represented in thoughts and words. Some external prayers can reflect that deeper spiritual awareness.

3. Email me at abbaom@yahoo.com if you are interested in detailed instruction in meditation and forms of contemplative prayer.

4. Two years ago in a high priest group meeting, our lesson was on following and obeying church leadership. This was an accomplished group of men with decades of church leadership. I suddenly lost composure and interjected, “Is it bothering anyone that this lesson could be picked up and taken down to the Primary and taught to the children without any modifications?!” After an awkward silence, a friend in the group said, “What Brother McLemore meant to say was . . .” I then apologized for the interruption and asked the teacher to continue.

5. Friendship with “Christ” is not simply some sort of interaction with the man Jesus. For Christian mystics, and in my experience, the term “Christ” refers to the life, light, and love of the Father present in all of creation. Jesus abided in and embodied this “Christ.” So in the Friendship stage, one experiences a mutual interaction and shared life with Jesus as “Christ,” as well as with creation itself and the Father. The man Jesus does not have to be present for this realization, which is in fact, a deeper and more expansive spiritual realization than the personal appearance of the person Jesus. For an explanation of the Cosmic Christ, I suggest Richard Rohr, *Christ, Cosmology & Consciousness: A Reframing of How We See* (MP3 download) and *The Cosmic Christ* (CD, MP3 download) from the Center for Action and Contemplation.

6. John 17:23. The common teaching in LDS classes that the oneness Jesus is talking about in John 17 means “oneness of purpose” is a startling example of spiritual blindness and the reduction of the greatest mystery of the Gospel to a concept understood by the human mind!

7. Paramahansa Yogananda, *God Talks to Arjuna*, (Los Angeles: Self Realization Fellowship, 1995), 635. His expression “Being of the Spirit” is a reference to God.

8. Again, as in note 3, the expanded meaning of Christ is intended

9. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 30th step, 5.