

## A Response to the Address “The Real Meaning of the Atonement”

In April 1977 W. Cleon Skousen presented a fireside in Safford, Arizona entitled “the Real Meaning of the Atonement.” This talk was later distributed in tape format and has been transcribed multiple times and circulated widely among the Latter-day Saints, **particularly among full-time missionaries**. The following is a list of doctrinal and methodological concerns from the talk and responses to those concerns.

1. The talk begins with and contains references throughout to the notion that many of the things the author will present are rarely, if ever, discussed in the Church.

- “I want to comment” on a subject “that is never discussed. We just don’t talk about it” (page 1a [# is followed by an ‘a’ for left column or ‘b’ for right column])
- “The Prophets . . . used to understand and preach this doctrine extensively, [we’ve kind of stopped preaching this among ourselves].” (page 5a)
- “Why don’t we talk about the real basis of the Atonement?” (page 8a)

**These statements carry serious implications.** The speaker is about to discourse on a subject that is not discussed widely, either because the prophets today do not understand it, or because we are either unworthy or unprepared to hear it. If in fact what the speaker is about to say is the real basis or meaning of the atonement, and yet, we don’t teach it in the church today, that is a major indictment! An appropriate response to the above issue is that “The Real Meaning of the Atonement” deals with **several speculative ideas** about which the Lord has not given definitive doctrinal answers, concepts over which there is no unanimity of opinion.

President Harold B. Lee gave important counsel on how to read and respond to those who teach speculative notions.

It is dangerous for teachers of religion to teach as absolute facts that can’t be controverted something that is still in the realm of speculation and theory, and *when you find someone who is writing a book in which they speak with a pedantic authority as though it was an accomplished fact and couldn’t be gainsaid, then you put a question mark by it and write “theory.”* I will tell you what I do as I read these many books that come (and I think the day is here when we have got to be more discriminating in our reading than ever before). Let me suggest a method. As you read these books, no matter who writes them, read carefully down the record, and where their teaching is in complete agreement with the revelations that the Lord has given us and with the teachings of the scriptures, accept it as being fact, but *where they go off into imaginative suppositions or speculations that are not fully proved by the scriptures, write out in the margin the name of the author.* It is his idea, you see. Distinguish as between the individual’s idea and that which is supported by scriptures. (*Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, p. 441, emphasis added; cited hereafter a *THBL*.)

On another occasion President Lee warned that it is [not] the role of religion teachers to bring forth or to establish new doctrine.

It isn’t the business of our teachers of religion to bring forth anything new. Their responsibility is to teach the old truths, the simple truths, the foundation teachings of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and not to be concerned about speculations that are startling and intriguing, *whether true or not.* (p. 462, emphasis added)

One further bit of counsel given by President Lee is also significant when studying the claims made in the present article under consideration.

With respect to doctrines and meanings of scriptures, let me give you a safe counsel. It is usually not well to use a single passage of scripture in proof of a point of doctrine unless it is confirmed by modern revelation or by the Book of Mormon. I want you to think of that, brethren. *To single out a passage of scripture to prove a point, unless it is confirmed also by revelation or by the Book of Mormon, is always a hazardous thing.* Be careful in quoting comments from writers about a certain scriptural matter as though it was authoritative unless you, likewise, have tested their expression by the Book of Mormon and the revelations. (p. 57, emphasis added)

2. On page two of the “Real Meaning of the Atonement” the author begins a speculative discussion on the nature and characteristics of intelligence, drawing his ideas in part from statements by Brigham Young. The problem is that much of the speculation is woven in among what may be considered as known truth. The terms intelligence, intelligences, spirit, or spirits are not always used consistently in Latter-day Saint literature or discourses. This can create a great deal

of confusion. **Intelligence**, when not referring to one's intellectual attainment, usually refers to the **spirit element** that existed before we were born as spirit children of our Heavenly Father. **Intelligences usually refers to organized intelligence, meaning spirit children** of our Heavenly Father (Abr. 3:22). Little is known about our status or existence as intelligence. Joseph Fielding Smith cautioned us about speculating as to the nature of intelligence.

*Some of our writers have endeavored to explain what an intelligence is, but to do so is futile, for we have never been given any insight into this matter beyond what the Lord has fragmentarily revealed. We know, however, that there is something called intelligence which always existed. It is the real eternal part of man, which was not created nor made. This intelligence combined [? even that is speculation] with the spirit constitutes a spiritual identity or individual. (Progress of Man, p. 11, emphasis added)*

In "The Real Meaning of the Atonement" the interpretation of D&C 93:29–30 and the explanation of the term intelligence goes beyond what the prophets have declared authoritatively.

3. Another concern arises when the speaker launches into a "scientific" discussion of element, matter, intelligence and chemistry (p.2b). I took these statements to two experts in the physical sciences here at BYU. Both of these men indicated that the way the terms are used by the author make his statements incoherent. They are not placed in a correct scientific framework and thus the statements are incomprehensible. Brother Skousen states: "Some of these little elements are just as ornery as you and me. They go wandering around, and in the aggregate we say that [actions of the elements constitute] the laws of chemistry.... If all the elements were obeying all the rules of chemistry you would never die." These statements make it appear that death is the result of intelligence rebelling against God. This is, of course, speculation.

Interestingly, the speaker refers to his mission president, Elder John A. Widtsoe, as the source of much of his understanding. Yet in Elder Widtsoe's writings he states "that a degree of intelligence is possessed by every particle of energized matter **cannot be said**; nor is it important" (*A Rational Theology*, pp.13–14). This is in direct conflict with the author's statements.

4. Next, the speaker introduces the notion that "honor" is God's power (D&C 29:36) (see p. 3a). That is, God has all power only because he enjoys the complete support of all the independent, individual intelligences. Here we have a case where one aspect of the power of God, his honor, is singled out, focused on, and one is asked to consider all things pertaining to the power of God through this restricted lens. It leaves one with a **very distorted and incomplete sense of the power of God**. This exaggeration, which is carried throughout the rest of the paper, potentially leaves one worrying about what may happen if all of God's "little intelligences" were to rebel against him and thus leave him powerless and no longer a God. The author next cites the statements in Alma 42:13, 22, 25 as further evidence that our Heavenly Father "walks the razor's edge of celestial law continually," in order to keep from having the intelligences run him out of office (see p. 3b). [Seems to be in direct opposition to all that is taught in the *Lectures on Faith* about God. How can we have trust and faith in a Deity whose situation is precarious? See for example Lecture 3:19-23]. It appears the author misunderstood the intent of Alma's words. Alma's point to his son Corianton was intended to be only rhetorical and not literal. For indeed "God ceaseth, not to be God" (Alma 42:25). **Never for a fleeting moment did Alma intend to imply that God could ever cease to be God**. The tragedy of the notion taught or implied here is that God is reduced to one who could topple his own kingdom. In the over dramatic words of the author; "who dares to suggest that anything could happen to challenge the power of almighty Elohim?" Neither Alma nor the Latter-day prophets teach that such could be the case. Speaking of the meaning of D&C 93:36 and Moses 4:1 Elder Orson Pratt explained:

[Satan] sought to destroy the plan of God and the agency that the Lord intended to give to intelligent beings, and to redeem them whether they would be redeemed or not; and because he considered that his plan was so good before the heavens, and so much superior to the plan that God had devised, said he, "Surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor, which is the power of God." That is, he sought to obtain the throne of the Almighty, and to carry out his own purposes in preference to yielding to the purposes and power of the Almighty. (*Journal of Discourses* 13:63)

It should be noted that God is powerful because of his infinite goodness, wisdom, and perfection, because he is a glorified, exalted being. In the words of Elder Bruce R. McConkie, "God is not a student. He is not a laboratory technician. He is not postulating new theories on the Basis of past experiences. He has indeed graduated to that state of exaltation that consists of knowing all things and having all power" (BYU Speeches 1972, p. 75). **The farthest thing from the truth, then, is the suggestion that God could potentially fall or apostatize and thus cease to be God**. Alma's point (Alma 42) is a purely rhetorical statement to his son Corianton to emphasize God's unchanging mercy and justice to his children.

5. **Another doctrinal misrepresentation** occurs on page 3b where the speaker represents God the Father as saying: "Once I had put you down into the second estate, I lost complete control over the possibility of bringing you back to myself." God the Father cannot save us. These are doctrines of the Church that we seldom put in these dimensions." To

leave the impression that all was not known, planned, provided, and prepared for under the Father's direction is a **serious misrepresentation**, as is the idea that God does not have control over the possibility of bringing us back to Him. Indeed, this is His power, work, and Glory (Moses 1:39) The power the Savior had, he received from his Father: "The Son can do nothing of himself but what he seeth the Father do" (John 5:19). The Father had no more nor less power to eternally save his children after the Fall than he had before.

6. The terms Justice and Mercy are used in a very unorthodox way, which could lead to serious misunderstanding (see p. 4a). The impression is given that it is the "little intelligences" that demand justice: "There's an offense here", says one of the intelligences; "they cannot come back, Father." The author suggests that the intelligences say to God: "You have to make the wicked suffer so we will feel it is fair." It is as though the "little intelligences" are the demanders of justice. **This is not only speculation, but seriously misrepresents the correct concept of justice and mercy!** The misunderstanding continues when the author implies that it is the little intelligences that need to be satisfied, not God. One might get the impression from this view that if not for the courageous and noble work of the intelligences, justice could not be served. In point of fact, it is God's justice that must be satisfied. What prophets teach is that "the justice of God holds each of us responsible for our own transgressions and automatically imposes the penalty. This reality should permeate our understanding, and it should influence all our teachings about the commandments of God and the effect of individual transgressions." (Dallin H. Oaks "Sin, Crimes, and Atonement" address to CES Religious Educators, 7 Feb. 1992, p.2) It is God who demands justice and he must do so when divine law is violated—pure and simple.

7. The author speculates: "I wouldn't be a bit surprised if the real followers of the Father there [premortal life] for a while, were a minority. And we had a big uncommitted, in the middle, majority.... I won't be surprised ... if we only had a minority to begin with"(p. 4b) Thus his notion is that the big middle portion of premortal spirits were uncommitted. We will of course not know this until we get to the other side of the veil and our memory of our former existence is restored. The purpose of this speculation appears to be to add to the "drama" of the story. President Joseph Fielding Smith has given the appropriate response to this speculation. "How many were almost persuaded, were indifferent, and who sympathized with Lucifer, but did not follow him, we do not know. The scriptures are silent on this point."(*The Way to Perfection*, p.43)

8. Satan's plan is referred to as "No-Risk insurance"(p. 4b). While I am sure the author understands that this is a lie, he does not take the time to explain why Satan's plan could have never worked and was indeed a "total risk" plan with no 'payout' except misery in the end.

9. While referring to the Savior's atoning sacrifice, it is made to appear as something "we [ intelligences] use him" for (pp. 4b & 5a). It is stated that "we" have him come down, not the Father. The author declared, "And *incidental* thereto, while laboring among the human family, 'We' have him suffer so terribly that the little intelligences of the entire universe are revolted." And finally we will say it is enough. This approach is completely conjecture. It leaves one with **serious misconceptions about the purpose of the Savior's life**. It is made to appear that the "bowels of mercy" are in the "little intelligences" who finally say to Jesus "well, they [ sinners] really shouldn't go back, but if you want them, after all you went through for them—yes, they can go up." That's the Atonement"(see p.5a). The questions this whole scenario creates include: Who is the Judge? Before whom does the Savior plead our cause—with God or the intelligences? (D&C 29:5; 38:4; 45:3-5). And, very importantly, who really is in charge of the universe? The "bowels of mercy" seem to refer to the mercy of the "little intelligences" who finally concede to accept Christ's offering. **This is outside the accepted doctrine of the Church**. The scriptures clearly teach it is because Christ has suffered for us and taken upon him our sins, infirmities, and pains, that his bowels of mercy can overpower justice (Alma 7:11-13; 34:15-16).

President Howard W. Hunter clearly explained the role of the Savior's suffering in developing his mercy.

We are indebted to the prophet Alma for our knowledge of the full measure of His suffering: "He shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people.

"And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities." (Alma 7:11-12.)

Think of it! When his body was taken from the cross and hastily placed in a borrowed tomb, he, the sinless Son of God, had already taken upon him not only the sins and temptations of every human soul who will repent, but all of our sickness and grief and pain of every kind. He suffered these afflictions as we suffer them, according to the flesh. He suffered them all. He did this to perfect his mercy and his ability to lift us above every earthly trial (*Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*; pp. 6-7).

10. On page 6b the impression is given that as Christ endured the suffering of Gethsemane it is as though he said “Father you are God, you’re all powerful, all things are possible unto thee—Don’t make me go through this! We can work it out some other way.” Then the author goes on to explain that the angel who came to minister to Christ “undoubtedly, explained to Him something he’d forgotten—He’s forgotten his Pre-existence. He was Born to suffer and Die.” **Again this is a huge assumption**, and all that we know about the Savior to this point and time revolts against such notions(see Matt. 20:28; John 6:51;14:6, D&C 19:18). The author goes on to speculate further at what the angel next said to the Savior. “You do not have to do this, unless you wish. But you should know that unless you fulfill this assignment, the Father will lose not only this family, the whole family, but the entire creation associated with them. The planets, the plants, the animals,... will be lost to the Father.” It is hard to imagine that the Son of God, at this stage, even with the veil partially in place, would be this ignorant and lacking in understanding. **The speculation here is without any foundation or cause** (see John 5:20; 6:51; 10:15; 12:32). **The Savior is presented as being ignorant, doubtful, and bargaining** rather than pleading or hopeful that the Father may have a “ram in the thicket” he has not told the son about. Furthermore, it is always unwise to try and put words in the mouth of angels when we have no authority to do so.

In summary, besides the overt speculation in certain doctrinal areas, the overriding concern with “The Real Meaning of the Atonement” is that **it leads one away from the correct doctrine that “God is the only supreme governor and independent being in whom all fulness and perfection dwell”** (*Lectures on Faith* 2:2). The Prophet Joseph taught that one of the necessary keys “in order for any rational being [ exercise faith in God unto life and salvation.... [is] a *correct* idea of His character, perfections, and attributes” (*Lectures on Faith* 3:2,4). Unfortunately, “The Real Meaning of the Atonement” falls short of this mark.